# MARIA OF PADUA

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# MARIA OF PADUA

In referring to Graces obtained through the intercession of little Maria the author declares he does not will in any way to contravene the pontifical dispositions in that matter, nor intend to give a more than human authority to what is related.

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MARIA IN THE LAST YEAR OF HER LIFE

# MARIA OF PADUA

## ONE OF S. THÉRÈSE'S LITTLE LEGION WITH AN INTRODUCTION

*By* BENEDICT WILLIAMSON

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TO
THE MOST SWEET HEART
OF JESUS

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# INTRODUCTION

"I CANNOT imagine what the world was like before S. Thérèse came into it," remarked a young girl to me recently. For a moment the remark startled me, but the more I reflected on it the more I recognized how truly she had spoken. It is perfectly true that the doctrine of S. Thérèse of Lisieux has profoundly impressed itself upon the spiritual life of our time and changed the whole outlook regarding the relations between the soul and God.

There is no instance in the history of the Church of a spiritual writer exercising so widespread an Apostolate in so short a space of time, for it is far more through her doctrine than her life that S. Thérèse has exercised so potent an influence over the whole world. She is, above all, the doctor of the spiritual life of our time, a time so pitifully blinded by human pride and human folly; to combat its arrogance God sends this young virgin of but twenty-four years to teach it wisdom, the wisdom of love. She is pre-eminently *the* doctor of the love of God, and a writer in *La Vie Spirituelle* in the

course of two articles dealing with the essential vocation of the saint, marked by a singularly acute analyses, brings this out very clearly.*

He refers to the early incident of her childhood as prophetic of her great mission the occasion when, stretching out her little hand upon the basket of toys and trifles, she exclaimed: "I choose all," and shows how, when the Divine union was consummated and she was nigh to death, she still manifested in the spiritual sphere the ardour of her childhood: "She would be everything in the body of the Church; warrior, priest, doctor, apostle, martyr." But mark the helplessness of this young girl of twenty-four years, shut within the four walls of a cloister and dying from tuberculosis, with every field of action closed to her.

Yet her desires were as vast as the universe, and knew neither bounds nor repose. Her helplessness, far from depressing her, only served to nourish her impetuosity. She was swept along all the ways which the servants of God had followed; finally, she found the pre-eminent way of love which resumes and embraces them all.

"Finally I have found my vocation," exclaims S. Thérèse. "My vocation is love. Yes, I have found my place in the womb of the Church, and that place, O my God, is the one You have given me. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I shall be

* See "La vocation de Sainte Therese de l'Enfant Jesus," in the April and May numbers (1930) of *La Vie Spirituelle*.

love. Thus I shall be all, thus shall my dream be realized."

"I shall be love." Amazing confidence! All the saints have performed works of love. Doctors, in the fervour of contemplation, have received lights which they have given to others. Apostles have been inflamed with the sole desire of making their Master loved. Martyrs have possessed that charity —the greatest one can have—of giving their lives for those they loved. Thérèse envied them all, but was not satisfied.

She chose, then, not to perform works of love, *but to be love*. She made her choice with that assurance so characteristic of her, both naturally and supernaturally. And God did not reject her choice, for she says that He will fulfil her "immense desires" bordering on the infinite.*

And the Apostolate of love which has developed in the course of the thirty-three years which have run since she sped from the cloister of Lisieux to the courts of Heaven has been ever growing in expansion till it has embraced the whole earth, appealing to every nation, east and west, north and south, and to every class, learned and unlearned, rich and poor, to the humblest workman and the most profound theologian.

And this Apostolate has been equally increasing in profundity. More and more we begin to realize not only how simply she speaks, but also how pro-

* See pp. 41–42, *La Vie Spirituelle*, April, 1930.

foundly she speaks; and the more her doctrine of love and abandon to the good pleasure of Jesus becomes developed the more souls enter into intimacy with the heart of God, the more abundantly they come to realize that "God *is* Love, and he who dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 John iv. 16). If I was to point out the contrast between the days immediately preceding the coming of S. Thérèse and those that have followed, I should say it was the contrast between the way of fear and love. Holy Communion, the reception of Jesus into the heart, was rather the reward of the perfect than the strength and consolation of the weak. Holy Communion was regarded rather as something rare and exceptional requiring long preparation, than as the children's bread.

It is the supreme glory of S. Thérèse of Lisieux that she dealt the final death-blow, not to Jansenism, which had already been cast out, but to the many paralysing remnants of that dreadful gospel of fear which had been left behind and had wrought such terrible havoc amongst souls. "My way is all love and confidence," says S. Thérèse. Confidence not in herself, but in the measureless love of God and His infinite compassion and pity; a confidence which, with wonderful daring, she declares would not have faltered even though she had been guilty of every sin which it is possible to commit.

And her doctrine is everywhere bearing the most marvellous fruit, as she so prophetically foresaw it

would in that last passionate outpouring of love which she wrote to her sister Marie: "But why these desires to communicate the secrets of your love, O my well-beloved? Is it not you alone who have taught them to me, and can you not reveal them to others? Yes, I know it, and implore you to do it. I beseech you to incline your divine glance on a great number of little souls. I beseech you to choose in this world a legion of little victims worthy of your love." Amongst this legion of little victims surely the heroic little Maria of Padua, who but three years ago sped to God, claims the first place.

Maria Filippetto was born at Padua, "citizen of no mean city," on Good Friday, April 5th, 1912, so she would only have been eighteen this year had she remained thus long upon earth. She formed her spiritual life on the saint of Lisieux, and how profoundly she drank of her spirit the story of her wonderful life bears abundant witness.

This extraordinary little girl did not attain sanctity all at once. She had a strong masterful personality, she was proud and imperious, and this manifested itself very early, as a glance at her photograph at the age of three makes evident. But she had a wonderful mother, who trained her little girl with the most extraordinary wisdom and prudence. From the age of three this marvellous little girl began a tremendous combat with her own nature, which she continued for years, until, finally,

she became a sweet gracious smiling child, facing the most terrible suffering with heroic courage such as recalls the virgin martyrs of the first ages of the Church. Indeed, the spirit of S. Agnes seems to live again in this heroic little girl, and her indomitable fortitude makes us realize very vividly that the intrepid courage of young girls like S. Agnes is no idealized picture of later ages, but the bare truth in all its stark reality.

At the age of ten her long five years' martyrdom began, borne with a smiling countenance and a serenity of spirit that leaves us equally stricken with admiration and amazement. She endured four long painful operations without anæsthetics with a courage far beyond that of nature, a courage that had its source in the intensity of her spiritual union with Jesus. No cry came from the childish lips as her flesh quivered beneath the surgeon's knife. She fixed her eyes on her crucifix, which throughout these operations she held firmly grasped in her hand. With her heart fixed on Jesus she bore the torture of her innocent flesh with unflinching fortitude.

One can understand such courage, perhaps, the first time, but for the succeeding operations, when this dear little girl well understood all that awaited her, it is altogether another matter.

Think of the spirit of this little girl of fourteen who in the interval of her operations could say to Jesus : " Jesus, do with me what you like, only give

me strength to bear well every pain for love of You."

All the child's thought was to spare others suffering on her account, especially her father. Her mother, a *Mater dolorosa* in very truth, stood beside her darling child throughout all the agonizing moments of those painful operations.

Just before the last one, Father Rosi, S.J., asks her: "What if Jesus wants you to suffer again for Him?" And Maria's answer is a smile. "What if He asks you to shed a little more blood for the salvation of souls?"

But "Yes, yes," comes the eager response from little Maria. "I am pleased to suffer; I tell Jesus He can do with me just as He likes." On this last occasion the surgeon found little Maria so weak that he doubted if her strength would sustain the two consecutive operations. But she faced it all with a smiling serenity that amazed the onlookers. The surgeon himself was surprised, not only at her calm, dauntless courage, but at her extraordinary resistance.

When it was all over and for a moment she was alone with her mamma, the brave little girl said to her: "How good Jesus is! How marvellously He has helped us to bear this pain. I have suffered, but you, mamma, have suffered much more, because to my suffering you have added your own anguish. Jesus has given us two so much strength. We will bless and thank Him together."

What a wonderful example of the utter selflessness which happily is one of the most splendid characteristics of Italian girls to-day, as it has been in the past. Listen to the child's own account of it: "The doctor said two operations were necessary. The same day the surgeon came and performed them both. Jesus was my only strength; with my eyes fixed upon the crucifix I was able to bear everything well. Offering it all to Him I seemed to be armed with a supernatural strength." Here we see living again in this twentieth century the martyr spirit of the first. What a rebuke, what a monition to the selfish philosophy of this age, which would escape suffering at any cost and will not tolerate the most trifling pain, is the life of this heroic little girl and the courage with which she embraced and loved suffering because it is the expression of love.

And more and more selfless grew this holy little virgin as the years of her martyrdom sped by. She became an apostle of flame; all her sufferings were offered to Jesus to save souls, and how acceptable to the Divine heart her sacrifice was is clearly attested by the many conversions her prayers obtained, the knowledge of which was one of her consolations while still upon earth.

Her passion for souls increased with every breath she drew, her zeal reached out to ever wider fields of labour until it closed with that last dramatic outpouring on the day of her death. Early that morning, June 3rd, 1927, Jesus had come to His

little victim beneath the sacramental veil for the last time. Late in the afternoon Father Rosi, S.J., seeing her last hours upon earth had come, asked her if she would like to receive Jesus again as *viaticum*, and, receiving an eager affirmative, hastened away to the church to bring her Lord to her.

Just a moment afterwards her face became irradiated with an unearthly glory, and her eyes illumined with heavenly light, and a sweet smile played about her lips. Suddenly she seemed to gain an extraordinary strength and, raising herself up, exclaimed with passionate enthusiasm: "How beautiful! I am pleased, so pleased! And you, mamma, you are pleased? We are all pleased! And have we not reason to be pleased? But if you would all be contented, do what I tell you. I am pleased to have done all I could to please Jesus. But all, all ought to do all they can . . . all . . . all the world. Oh, if the whole world would do what they could, how they would content Jesus! All . . . all the angels . . . all. . . . Mamma . . . ma-ma," and the heroic little figure, utterly spent and exhausted by this last fiery outburst of love and zeal, sank back utterly helpless upon the pillows.

Just at this moment Father Rosi returned, but it was too late; seized by an inspiration, he placed the Blessed Sacrament on the breast of the dying child and left it there until she breathed her last. Her long martyrdom was over and that holy soul

passed from this land of exile to the face-to-face vision of the Jesus she had loved and served with such passion and such devotion. It was a few minutes after nine o'clock on the evening of June 3rd, 1927.

Dear little Maria's mission on earth was finished, but her mission from Heaven was now to begin. Every day we see new proofs of her power with God. The closing chapters tell something of what little Maria of Padua has done and is doing. I add one case under my own observation. In a hospital in Rome there was a poor man who for years had been neglecting his religion. I gave him the life of little Maria to read; he read it with great eagerness and, profoundly moved, asked to go to confession, which he did, making his Holy Communion on Whit-Sunday, following with a most marked and touching devotion. God's arm is not shortened and He is raising up souls of the same heroic mould to-day as He did at the first. The legion of little victims of S. Thérèse of Lisieux is already in formation; many of these victims are hidden and unknown. God has willed His little Maria should be manifest to encourage and hearten the rest.

And there is something singularly consoling for us in the figure, so strong and heroic, of Maria of Padua. She had a long hard struggle with her own strong proud independent spirit, as we see again and again in her story, but she overcame by

the same grace and the same strength by which we, too, can overcome.

Grace did not destroy her strong resolute personality, but sanctified it. She needed all that strength of character with which she was endowed to face the five years of her martyrdom, and to face them with a sweet and winning smile.

She is, first of all, a great example to the youth of her own land, but not only to them but the youth of all the world; and not to youth only, but those of every age, for all can draw inspiration and strength from the indomitable courage of this sweet little girl whose most wonderful victory was her victory over herself.

She is a child of our own age—the age of the great war—of those fateful years from 1912 to 1927, when the old world died and the new world was born. She has lived through the rebirth of her native land after the tragic war years and seen the new Italy arise from the ashes of the old. So no one can say, as, alas, perhaps some of us are inclined to do as we read the heroic story of the first ages of the Church, "Ah, but people were differently constituted in those days," because here is a frail little girl of our own day repeating in her fragile body the experiences of the first martyrs. To an age of mental and moral weakness she opposes the supernatural doctrine of the cross, and that, too, in its acutest form.

May she be not unmindful of us before the great

white throne; may she obtain those graces of sweetness and gentleness, fortitude and courage, heroic self-forgetfulness and abnegation, generous love and generous abandon of which she has shown us so magnificent an example. The Holy Father's words* are very encouraging here: "See what it is to have friendship with God, with Jesus! Happy the souls—and happily they are many, *and always increasing in number*—who see the sweetness of this truth, who have tasted the friendship of Jesus, with Jesus!

"We insist on this point and press the invitation on all to see *quam suavis est Dominus*, to set before their minds this wonderful incredible thing of the friendship of God. All can enter into this secret, all can have this true treasure. And that it may not be difficult God has become Man to make our approach to Him easy. Thus our friendship with Him is both divine and human—thus can we approach, embrace and perceive the Divine Friend in a vision of thought, work and feeling."

Yes, the same grace that glorified little Maria of Padua is offered to us. The same Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is ours, as He was also hers.

Dear little Maria, look down on us here below, and bestow upon us your sweet smile. Upon the girlhood first of all of your own beloved land, that those wonderful qualities of gentleness, sweetness,

* Address delivered on the reading of the decree for the beatification of Blessed Corrado da Pargham.

self-sacrifice and generous devotion which have been, and yet are, the glory of the girlhood of Italy, may be preserved and increased, and that the girls of Italy may be encouraged and inspired to still more generous ideals by your heroic example. And upon youth, boys and girls, upon men and women, upon the old and the middle-aged, not only of your own land, but of all the world, bestow that sweet smile of yours with which to inspire them all to tread with courage and confidence "the sure way" of S. Thérèsa of Lisieux which you have trod with such intrepid courage and unwavering fidelity.

BENEDICT WILLIAMSON.

ROMA: Feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, 1930.

# MARIA OF PADUA

## CHAPTER I

### EARLY DAYS

IT was on April 5th of 1912 that dear little Maria was born at Padua, in North Italy, in the spring-time of the year, when Nature is awakening to new life after the long sleep of winter, and fields, hedges and trees are arrayed in the fresh radiant green of *primavera*, and the flowers appear the sure heralds of the summer days which are soon to follow.

The day on which little Maria was born happened to be Good Friday, that day on which the faithful throughout the world recall the passion and death of our Saviour, and it was not without a singular fitness that the death day of the Redeemer should be the occasion of this dear child's entrance into the world, since Jesus, in His loving designs, had destined this sweet spring flower to be adorned with the thorns of His own most bitter passion.

Begotten in a devout Catholic family, her coming was greeted with immense joy by all, as being a most precious gift from Heaven, all the more

welcome and precious because she came to fill the place left vacant by a dear little angel sister who but three years before had flown away to Heaven.

The only girl, she was loved, caressed and adored by her parents and brothers, and passed the early days of her infancy in the sweet family nest where a wonderful peace, calm serenity and perfect harmony reigned supreme. Her parents, Eliseo and Emilia Filippetto, were both members of the teaching profession; they simply lived for their children, and, with the full consciousness of the greatness of their responsibility, devoted themselves unsparingly to giving them a sound, serious and Christian education, and from the first dawn of reason strove to infuse into the hearts of their little ones the seeds of a solid and fervent piety.

Every morning their mamma awoke the children by reciting in a clear distinct voice the familiar petition, "Sweet Heart of my Jesus, make me to love you ever more and more," and as the lips of her children stammered forth their repetition of the prayer she would say to them: "Up, up children, it is Jesus who calls you, be quick; don't you want to make a good beginning to your day along with Him?"

Very early little Maria began to love Jesus, and to turn to Him and His sweet Mother in all her little childish troubles; relating with childhood's simple confidence all her little secrets and aspirations.

There was nothing extraordinary about her; she had an open, intelligent, versatile mind, an affectionate heart and a singularly transparent sincerity that was proof against every temptation. But she was not lacking the faults common to most children. Hers was a proud imperious nature, intensely sensitive, and one that would not suffer the least contradiction or opposition, and, most disquieting of all, she appeared almost wholly lacking in that gracious gentleness which is the sweetest as well as the most fitting endowment of girlhood.

This harsh characteristic seemed, indeed, to be quite at variance with her general dispositions, but there it was all the same.

From her brothers especially she would tolerate none of those playful tricks of which boys are so fond, while if she was contradicted she would blaze with indignation and her voice would at once assume a harsh metallic ring in keeping with her feelings, while even to strangers her manner was often cold and reserved, and her replies sharp and cutting.

Her frequent collisions with her brothers did not arise from any lack of affection, but arose from the excessive sensitiveness of little Maria on the one hand and the natural exuberance of spirits on the part of her brothers on the other.

Of the two, Mario was the most vivacious, and in consequence the one most frequently in conflict with little Maria, yet both boys loved their sister

very tenderly and did what they could to please her, and were always prompt to protect her.

One very wet day in October by quite an exceptional circumstance the three children were all alone in the house. The steady downpour of autumnal rain produced an impression of depression on the children and they felt the cold, perhaps, all the more for being alone. Piero and Mario became suddenly very anxious about their little sister, and thought to light the stove for her. This was a serious affair, of which they had no previous experience; but to think with children is generally to do, and soon the whole room was littered with their preparations.

Fortunately not long after their mother returned in time to prevent any harm. The room was filled with smoke, and the odour of burning wood had spread everywhere. The shoes of little Maria were being roasted on the stove; the two boys had put them there to make them nice and warm for the cold feet of their little sister. Their mother did not reprove them, but she made them realize the imprudence they had committed, while in her heart she felt not a little moved at this manifestation of brotherly affection towards the little one.

Mario, always quick and vivacious, many times annoyed his little sister over trifles, but he was always prompt and generous in making amends, and sometimes willingly took the blame for faults not his own.

And when, owing to some slight illness, little

Maria had to remain in bed, he remained with her all the time, bringing all his toys to her bed and inventing all sorts of amusements to help to pass the time pleasantly.

One has only to look at her determined little face at the early age of three, to realize what a very resolute will animated her strong dominating personality. Later on this determined character and resolute will, sanctified by grace, would stand her in good stead during the five long years of her painful martyrdom, when she showed a courage and constancy verily heroic.

Look at her again as she appeared in the last days of her earthly pilgrimage. Her sweet girlish face has the wistful gentleness which has come through suffering and taken away all the harshness of her childhood's days.

Naturally, her parents were greatly concerned at this defect in her character, and they grieved to think her many excellent qualities of head and heart should be overclouded and their force diminished by this acute asperity of manner, which appeared almost incurable. They could not resign themselves to the thought that this tender little plant must be allowed to grow up like some wild thistle.

Her mother prayed most fervently to our Blessed Lady to help her to cleanse this beautiful diamond from the mire which had encrusted it, and watched attentively, seizing every possible occasion in which to instil the virtue of gentleness into the heart of her

little Maria. Such a character as hers could be led, not driven, and only led by love. Little Maria had an affectionate, loving heart, and affectionately guided by her mother she quickly recognized her defects, and even while quite a little girl resolutely resolved to correct them.

Every time she fell into this defect, and at first her falls were frequent enough, she recognized her fault, expressed her sorrow, and renewed her promise of amendment.

In the beginning this involved no little sacrifice to her pride, and the struggle was a hard one, but later on she came forth calm and serene from the conflict, joyous and radiant at the victory she had gained over herself. Beneath her dress she wore her *rosary of victories*, which from her first years her mamma had taught her to use, and how happy she was in the evening when, before the statue of the Sacred Heart, she was able to say : " O Jesus, look, to-day I have overcome myself so many times ; to-morrow I shall be still more careful ! " Such a task as this, as anyone can realize, was one neither very easily nor very quickly accomplished. For years dear little Maria waged an unceasing war against herself. There was a succession of falls, of repentances, of tears, and of renewed promises. But every fall made her more determined in her efforts to correct herself. In her prayers she was continually asking from Jesus and Mary the grace to become good and gentle.

So, step by step, her defects were conquered, and her falls became less frequent, a certain angularity due to her fiery temperament became rounded off, she grew more polished and gracious, and sweetness and gentleness came to be her favourite virtues.

She had, like all Italian girls, a singular love for her family; she loved intensely her mamma, her brothers, and had special tenderness for her father; she loved, too, her godmother and her aunts, who idolized her; loving all and loved by all, she never sought her own satisfaction, but the pleasure of others. Whatever was asked of her for one or the other she gave willingly, glad to deprive and sacrifice herself for the happiness of others.

## CHAPTER II

### AT SCHOOL

AT six years of age little Maria went to school, where almost at once she was remarked for her clear open intelligence. Her naturally gifted nature placed her at the top of the class, while her goodness of heart won the affection of all her companions. Every day she returned home happy at some word of praise bestowed or a little triumph which she had won.

This all tended to nourish within her that tendency to pride which appeared almost innate in her. But her mother watched her little girl's development very attentively.

"You ought to try and be the best of all," she would say. "To be clever amounts to very little; in your case it is a duty. God has endowed you with a certain intelligence. You have been surrounded by those whose only thought has been to see you well instructed and well educated. Pass in review your companions. How many do you find as fortunately placed as yourself? What merit

have you therefore if you are first in your class ? It would be amazing if, with all the help you have had, you were not there." The little one was convinced by the mother's reasoning, and if ever a flash of pride arose in her heart it was quickly subdued.

One day she returned from school and sat down at the table without saying a word. A little frown showed itself upon her forehead and the corners of her mouth gave an indication of her distress.

" What has happened at school ? " inquired her mamma, who had watched her a few moments before speaking.

The only reply was a sob. She had made a mistake in the solution of a problem and was greatly distressed over her ill-fortune.

Her mother consoled her a little at the moment, but a few hours later, when they were quite alone, she wanted to know more precisely from her little girl what had happened. She would sound the depths of this little soul and examine the sentiments which animated her. Maria was distressed over the bad position she had taken, and also because some of her companions had done better than she. She recounted her misadventure, amidst sobs and tears, seated on her mother's knee—who, caressing her affectionately, said to her very sweetly : " Look, my darling, if you are displeased because you have failed to please your teacher and the school it is well, and your displeasure is praiseworthy ; but if

you grieve because your companions have done better than you, be well on your guard, because an ugly serpent, called envy, has entered your little heart.

" Our Lord has made you see that unless He helps us continually, of ourselves we can know nothing and do nothing that is good. Won't you come and bring to Jesus this big cross ? " And before the beloved statue her serenity returned, and her little heart became glad again.

She had a great affection for her teachers, and always felt most grateful to them for all they had done for her. Even during the last months of her life, in the midst of her sufferings, she recalled with great tenderness her two first mistresses, whom she called her doctors, and she preserved with jealous care the books, the little sacred pictures and cards they had given her. She prayed for them every day, begging Jesus to bless them for all the good she had received from them while at school.

Fairly strong, even if not over robust, her family never felt the least anxiety concerning her health. Vivacious, light-hearted, she filled the house with her merry cries and laughter. She shared with her brothers in all their games, climbing the trees as nimbly as a squirrel, whistling joyously. Dolls and toys which most little girls delight in interested her very little.

She would graciously thank those who gave her such presents, and then she would be off again in

a flash. The garden, races, the free and easy games with her brothers interested her most. It was usually she who led in all their amusements, and it was only when thoroughly tired out by her active movement that she felt the need of a little quiet; then she would help her elder brother. He, feeling perhaps the first impulse of the Divine call, had transformed into a little chapel a small dressing-room beside his bedroom, where he had constructed an altar, and every now and then, having prepared everything necessary and put on the vestments, he would call his brother and sister :

" Come, we are going to sing Mass."

Naturally he was the celebrant, Mario, in cotta, was there with the thurible, and little Maria, with a black veil over her head, kneeling at a *prie-Dieu*, represented the congregation. What was so admirable was not merely the brevity of the prayers, but the varieties of the liturgical chant which were chiefly the airs of certain popular motets and school songs. There was never a Mass without a sermon, and then the patience of the two little ones was put to a hard test, for they had no intention of remaining silent in the little room for any great length of time.

The mamma, naturally, was not present at these offices, but more than once she could not resist listening to the little preacher's discourses from an adjoining apartment. They were all very much alike : It was necessary to be good to merit Heaven, otherwise you would go to Hell . . . and then

followed a relatively terrifying description of the latter.

The preaching rarely finished without some incident, because Mario generally succeeded in upsetting the thurible, or interrupted the preacher with his observations and comments, while little Maria profited by the occasion to escape, exclaiming: "I wonder when the sermon will end?"

The preacher would then go after her in an attempt to make her return to the church, but she would take refuge near her mamma for a moment and then run out joyously into the garden. She more willingly took an active part in the magnificent processions, with their grand display of vestments and lights which Piero organized now and again, when he would invite a number of other boy friends to take part in them. The little procession, singing hymns and psalms with abundance of incense, would make its way several times round the rooms of the apartment. Even music was not wanting, for one of the little guests played a little mouth-organ on his own account, with small regard as to whether his efforts were in tune with the little singers or no.

Thus happily and tranquilly little Maria passed the days of her infancy, all full of promise for the life which was opening out before her. At seven years of age she was stricken with her first illness—measles under an acute and violent form, which kept her in bed for some time. Later on this was

followed by a light attack of nephritis, from which she recovered, although it left her rather weak, and her constitution became more delicate. Nevertheless, the doctors said she was fairly healthy, although somewhat frail and thin. Childhood, said they, had such recuperative powers that they did not consider her case one at all out of the ordinary.

In the summer she took the baths, and appeared so much stronger that all anxiety on the part of her family was finally allayed. Thus another two years passed by, and little Maria grew up into a sweet, graceful young girl, devout, serious, docile and laborious; yet all the time her weakness seemed to increase.

She was just like some lovely flower with so delicate a stalk that if bent would inevitably break. Nevertheless no one foresaw the terrible malady which in a short time was to imperil her existence and finally end her life.

## CHAPTER III

### TOWARDS HER APOSTOLATE

OUR Lord had endowed little Maria with a very sensitive heart; the sufferings of others became her own. The misery of the poor especially went straight to her heart; she wanted to help all those who were in need. Between her and her brothers there was always a competition as to who should be the first to put a penny into the hands of the beggar stretched out for alms. They were all three naturally generous; the money which was given to them was almost always devoted to almsgiving, and to relieve one in distress they freely renounced their sweets, toys or their little amusements.

"Will two *soldi** buy some soup?" inquired the children of their mamma one day while they sat at dinner and a beggar had knocked at the door. On receiving an answer in the negative all three exclaimed at once: "But then give a plate of soup to this poor beggar, he is so hungry, and what can he buy with the two *soldi* we have given him?"

* A *soldo* corresponds to a halfpenny.

Maria would always have a little money in her purse ; she preferred to make her charities with her own money, and she never refused anyone, although she had her preferences. There was a poor old woman whom she encountered every day at the corner of the street—for whom she felt a great pity—to whom she always gave a few coppers accompanied by some gentle words.

When she was out walking she certainly never waited for a hint from her mother before bending eagerly over the poor beggar seated on the pavement and putting into his hand her little offering. She wanted to help everybody, and more than once her mother had to restrain the ardent charity of this eager little soul, saying to her : " See, Maria, we are not so rich that we can succour all ; we must do the little we can, and pray to Jesus to provide for the others."

And her thoughts were not only turned towards the poor at home, but her heart went out in ardent charity towards those other poor, who were in greater need—towards the pagans.

When did Maria's love for the missions begin ? It is difficult to fix the precise moment, because she always loved them. The missions were often spoken of in the family, and Maria participated enthusiastically in the work of her brother Piero, who was a zelator for the missions. Then missionary books and periodicals all nourished this flame of love in her naturally ardent soul. Nor

was her enthusiasm an unfruitful one, for very soon she herself became a very active little zelatrix. She prayed every day for the missions, and endeavoured to bring to them her continuous, although slender material resources.

She collected used postage stamps, tinfoil, illustrated postcards—anything that would help the cause, and would speak eloquently to the little ones about the pagans, relating various incidents in the heroic labours of the missionaries. She never forgot their immense needs, nor wearied of soliciting alms for them from her parents, relatives and friends of the family. In the house she always had her little collecting box for the missions, and used all sorts of ingenious means to get it filled. When her mother was making up the family accounts she would hold out her little box, saying: "And is there nothing for me?" afterwards adding, "Put what you have left over in here!"

Then in the evening, when the family, with some friends, were sitting round the table in conversation, she found another favourable opportunity to plead her cause. She would only ask for a *soldo*: "Only a *soldo*," she would say, "for my missions"; and if anyone pretended not to hear, she would plead insistently: "Won't you be generous? Do not spend so many *soldi* upon yourselves; make a sacrifice and at least give me one. Jesus will take account of it, you know!"

When on feast days the relatives of the family were invited to dinner, she never let this occasion pass, and towards the end of the meal she would watch for an opportune moment and say: "We are all contented, contented and pleased because we are all together; and also," she would add, laughing, "because we have had a good dinner.

"But there are poor pagan children who have nothing to eat, there are missionaries deprived of almost everything, so you will be generous and give me what you can. I will accept for the poor pagan children any amount, however large"; and, shaking her little collecting box, she would make her round to collect their offerings. Naturally everyone was laughing, and so someone, just for fun, would pretend to protest. But little Maria was always quick at the attack, and would say: "First we invite you to dinner and now we hold you to ransom," and all, conquered by the little girl's gracious pleading, gladly opened their purses, and when at the end of her round, she opened her box she was able to count quite a handsome sum.

Her relatives and friends, knowing this affection of hers, realized that she would welcome an offering for her missions with far more pleasure than the gifts of flowers and other little things that generally please children so much, and so they acted accordingly. She began each day by praying for the missions and then went on to make as many little sacrifices as she could through which to obtain

the grace of baptism for as many poor pagan children as possible, and that Jesus might send more and more labourers into the vineyard.

Thus was the first light of her Apostolate kindled in the heart of our little Maria, a light which was nevermore to go out, but always go on increasing until it became such an ardent flame that it carried her so far, eager little missionary that she was, that she never refused Jesus anything, and was ready to suffer and die for the salvation of souls.

MARIA AT THE AGE OF THREE

## CHAPTER IV

### FIRST STEPS ON THE WAY TO CALVARY

IT was in the first half of the December of 1921 that little Maria was seized with a serious attack of influenza, and during her convalescence she was tormented for some days by an ulcer.

She grew very thin, and once again her parents became so anxious about her that she was subjected to a fresh and more vigorous medical examination.

On the day before Christmas Eve it was discovered that dear little Maria was stricken with diabetes in its gravest form.

It was an agonizing surprise for her father and mother, and they were almost paralysed with grief. At times they experienced almost a movement of rebellion in their souls ; they felt it almost impossible to resign themselves to such a calamity when the Saviour had already plucked one of their choice flowers. They passed days and hours in the throes of the most indescribable anguish, not

softened, at least in the beginning, by complete abandonment to the will of God.

They tried every way, used every means, to save their little victim from her fatal destiny. Various physicians were consulted, but they were all in agreement. They found themselves before one of those cases in which science, with all its resources, was helpless. Nothing could be done, or at least very little.

Given the grave form under which the malady appeared, its course must necessarily be rapid—fatal. Perhaps there only remained for her a few weeks more of life. There was no word of consolation to ease her poor parents in their anguish.

What are the designs of God ?

His Divine eyes had beheld with pleasure His little flower. He had chosen her for Himself, to adorn His heavenly halls ; but He would not take her to Himself so suddenly. He willed that through suffering and peaceful abandonment to His will she should acquire a new perfume, a yet unknown beauty. . . . He willed, perhaps, that His little snow-white lily should be offered to Him by the very hands of her own parents. Various cures were attempted. The whole thought of the family was concentrated on these efforts to preserve little Maria to them ; and in these first anxious days, which seemed so long, they alternated between hope and fear, one day their hopes would be raised, only to be shattered the next.

Nevertheless, these cures seemed to delay, at least to some extent, the onward course of this insidious malady. Indeed, at one time it seemed as if our Lord was ready to favour the ardent desires of her parents. They felt a little hope begin to arise in their hearts, and prayers, promises and vows were raised to Heaven more passionately than ever, in the hope of obtaining a complete cure.

For the time little Maria ceased to attend school, but that this sacrifice might not be too distressing for her she continued to study at home with her mamma.

Surrounded by so many marks of affection she hardly had time, in this first period of her illness, to think much about its gravity, and her happy serenity and natural gaiety were hardly at all affected by it.

Her character, too, underwent a change during this time, for, seeing herself surrounded by so much love, she tried hard to become more gentle, as if in this way to compensate her beloved parents for all the anxiety she was giving them. It was really touching to see how hard she tried to correct herself; many times under a just observation from someone, with the natural impulsiveness of her character, she would give a sharp retort; but, suddenly recovering herself, would change her tone and continue with a sweetness that was quite remarkable.

But Jesus had looked upon His little flower and had chosen her for Himself, and would Himself at this moment intensify His work of fashioning her according to His pleasure.

## CHAPTER V

### HER FIRST COMMUNION

MARIA was almost ten years old, so it was time for her to prepare herself for her first communion, and as she was too ill to attend along with the other first communicants the instructions given at the parish church, she made her preparation at home under the direction of her mother.

Jesus was about to come for the first time and take full possession of her little heart, and she quite understood the duty of making a good preparation for this great occasion. Her little defects, of which she was so well aware, and, indeed, had already in part corrected, must be wholly overcome; all evil weeds must be rooted up and replaced with the sweet flowers of new virtues.

So little Maria began to examine herself more accurately, more vigilantly, and with greater intensity. She thought of nothing but this most intimate union with Jesus, and almost every day her mother noticed a little improvement, a little

step in advance. Already from the beginning of her illness she had to place herself under a strict regime, and had accepted every privation with the utmost serenity. Every sacrifice became a little flower which she would offer to Jesus as a beautiful sweet-scented bouquet on the day of her first communion! Thus she renounced, with a smile, sweets, fruit, bread and other things of which she was rather fond.

One evening at dinner she asked for a certain dish. "Provided it will not do you harm," said her mother, doubting whether this particular thing was within the diet allowed her, "take a little." With her fork in hand, little Maria was waiting to be served, when, suddenly struck by an idea, she put it down, and, inclining her brown little head, whispered, "After all, it is only a touch of greediness, so I will not take any." A small sacrifice in itself, but when one realizes it was the act of a little child of ten, and a sick child at that, it does not seem quite so insignificant.

She greived at times over having to give up going to school. "It is Jesus," said her mamma to her, "who has asked this sacrifice so that you may have nothing to think about but Him; that, freed from every anxiety, you may prepare yourself to receive Him well."

Little Maria smiled at once, sure that no sacrifice could be hard for her if suffered for Jesus. She made little account of the strict diet, and the

renunciation of the life of constant movement to which she had been accustomed. For Jesus she endured long and wearisome cures, and for Jesus took the most unpleasant medicines; above all for Him she renounced that which she loved most of all—her active school-life which her quick intelligence had rendered so attractive to her. The day long expected came at last. Dear little Maria was happy, and could not think of the great moment without being deeply moved.

The evening before, while she was saying her prayers in her little room, she suddenly burst into tears; in a few hours her Jesus would come into her heart, and she was overwhelmed with love and tenderness at the thought of it. Before going to bed she asked pardon of her father and mother for all her faults, and begged their blessing; she would have her brothers, too, assure her that they had forgotten every one of her little rudenesses. She promised Jesus she would really become good, so very good, so that she might become wholly His, and might love Him for ever.

In her anxious expectation for the solemn moment she slept but little that night, and in the morning when her mother entered her room she found her already awake and praying fervently, her eyes filled with tears. Dressed in white, covered with a long white veil, she looked like a little angel as she went to the altar; and, indeed, she was a little angel in her purity and innocence.

When she had received Jesus her little face was radiant with happiness and emotion; at that moment she felt she was already in Paradise. What sweet communion with her beloved this pure little soul experienced, what exchange of promises of love! The emotion of that day remained long impressed upon her heart, and writing to her cousin some days later, she said: "The great feast is over, but my soul is still filled with joy. I cannot tell you what I experienced at that solemn moment when I received Jesus within me for the first time. Papa, mamma and my brothers received Holy Communion along with me."

## CHAPTER VI

### IN "THE SURE WAY"

FOLLOWING the advice of the doctor, she had shortly afterwards to leave the city and spend the summer and autumn partly in Liguria and partly in the Trentino. As a result of this such a marked improvement in her condition was manifested that hopes of seeing her restored to health once again revived in the hearts of her loved ones.

For some time Jesus had been asking a new and sorrowful sacrifice of her parents. At the end of September, 1922, Piero, her elder brother, just fifteen years of age, left home to enter the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus. The separation was a very painful one, but it was borne with great generosity. Dear little Maria felt very intensely the departure of her brother, whom she loved tenderly; yet, with a wisdom far above her years, to those who considered it too early an age for him to enter a religious order, she replied:

"But, if Jesus has called him, can we say no? Rather we ought to pray for him."

After a lengthy absence of five months Maria returned to her home. The mother was doubtful of the wisdom of her remaining away so long from her family and ordinary surroundings, especially in a place where she was surrounded with so much attention, the object of continual care, her least desire at once gratified, her slightest wish obeyed—for she feared it would favour the development of her naturally imperious will, and that dominating spirit which at home they had tried so hard to conquer. And she feared still more lest Maria's deep religious spirit which she had cultivated with such jealous care might be weakened.

But, in fact, nothing of this had happened. Jesus had watched over His little flower with a very particular care. Maria resumed her home life and went to school again for the first time since her illness. She felt very strongly her need of modelling her life on that of her Divine Master, and patiently, resolutely and tenaciously continued her fight against her own defects, sustained and helped by Jesus Himself in a most marvellous way, Whom now she was able to receive frequently in Holy Communion. Some time back she had been presented with the autobiography of S. Thérèse of Lisieux, which she read and re-read with avidity, meditating upon it and marking certain passages.

"The little way is one of spiritual childhood, of confidence and complete *abandon*."

"I would throw Jesus the flowers of little sacrifices and win Him by caresses."

"The little ones will be judged with extreme sweetness! It is possible to remain little in the midst of the most responsible offices. Is it not written that the Saviour, at the end of the world, will rise up to save all the meek and humble on earth? He does nor say to judge, but save."

"I have no other means of showing my love than that of scattering flowers; that is to say, I would not let any sacrifice, however small, escape me, not even a look, a word; I profit from the most trifling occasions and do everything for love. I wish to suffer through love and also to rejoice in suffering for love. Thus I scatter my flowers. I would not have one which has not been given to Jesus."

"We can never have too much confidence in God, who is so powerful and so merciful. We shall receive from Him according as we have hoped in Him."

Could not these thoughts of S. Thérèse of the Child Jesus also become hers? Could she not also walk along "the little way"? With great enthusiasm she placed herself under the protection of the sweet lily of Lisieux and, abandoning herself in the arms of Jesus, she began to tread her new way with marvellous ease. She still regretted she

was lacking in gentleness, too sharp in her speech, and she laboured against these defects without giving herself a moment's relaxation. "I will to be the meek docile little lamb of Jesus."

In her little diary we find, noted over a fairly long period, her particular examination of herself as regards this side of her character.

"To-day I have been to confession. I have determined not to contend with Mario." (The brother who so often put her patience to such severe tests.)

". . . I have kept my promise; I have been a little better."

"Have not been very good to-day. Have said some horrid things to Mario." (The horrid words were "stupid," "silly," etc.)

"I am a little better."

"To-day I have been rather cross with Mario, I shall try to be better to-morrow."

"Have not put up with things well. I must restrain myself."

"I have done fairly well to-day."

"I have been a little more gentle."

"To-day I have been a little rough. This evening I have been fanciful."

"I said two horrid things to Mario to-day."

"In church I have promised the Madonna that I will never give way to ill-temper."

"To-day I have not got out of temper, and have only cried once. Jesus help me!"

"I have not behaved well with my brother. I must correct myself. My Jesus!

"I have been better to-day."

"I have done not too badly."

Little Maria watched and struggled without ceasing. But what force she required at times in order to overcome herself!

One afternoon the garden resounded with her merry laughter as she raced about with her brother Mario. Suddenly she rushed headlong into the house, trembling with indignation, white with anger, desperately striving to keep back her tears. In very bad humour she picked up a book, opened it, and put it down again. She got up, wandered about aimlessly from one part of the room to another, then sat down at the table and took up the book again; finally she became calm and worked hard at her lessons. Her mamma, who was working nearby, observed it all, but thought it not the moment to say anything. An hour afterwards Maria had returned to the garden and was playing again.

In the evening her mamma gently inquired what the storm was about which had passed over her little darling. For a moment Maria remained a little embarrassed, then with her wonted frankness told the whole story. Mario, in one of his mad rushes, had wrecked the flowers in her little corner which she had cultivated with so much care. At the sight of this ruin her anger had arisen and she

was on the point of uttering the anything but complimentary words that rose to her lips; she tried desperately to master herself, and finally, so as not to give way, had rushed into the house.

There, after having conquered her anger, she felt in her heart a wonderful sweetness at having restrained herself, and later on, looking at her ruined flowers, she showed not the slightest sign of annoyance. To better overcome herself little Maria not only bore willingly the many restrictions on her life entailed by her illness, but mortified herself in a number of trifling ways. She herself weighed the ten grammes of bread she was allowed to have each day with the most scrupulous exactness. She enjoyed placing the fruit on the table herself, which she was not allowed to eat, because she had noted that since her illness her mamma had not prepared it. To Mario she gave chocolates and caramels which she bought with her pocket money. On family feast days she would provide or prepare some sweets which she presented triumphantly and, as if to justify herself, said playfully: "Otherwise you would not have had any."

One day in May she found in the garden three very ripe raspberries, the first of the season, and picked them for her mother. It was over two years since Maria had tasted fruit or sweets, and her mother, as she took them, said with a smile: "We will make a little change in your diet. Eat them, I give you permission." Maria opened her

eyes very wide. "It is May. No, mamma, I will make a little offering to the Madonna," and as if to make sure she would not give way to the temptation she ran over to her father, who was reading the newspaper, and put the fruit into his mouth.

One evening she was walking in the garden with a friend who had come to see her. She wanted to give her some grapes, and found a very fine bunch which she cut off the vine. She admired it for a moment and, in giving it to her friend, pulled off one grape and put it to her lips, but instantly withdrew it and threw it away. Only those who know child-nature can appreciate the value of these little mortifications.

She had a natural love of beautiful things, and liked everything she used to be in good taste. She used to spend a certain amount of time before the looking-glass, and was always very careful to select the choicest ribbon to tie up her hair.

She liked her clothes to be elegant and of fine material, and was very fond of adding something by way of ornament to her clothing, which her mamma always wished to be very plain and simple. This defect, one common to the majority of young girls, was, however, not of long duration, and she readily gave way to the advice of her mother in these things.

One day, going out for a walk, she wore on her dress a beautiful artificial flower which had been

given her. Her mother made no remark, but during their long walk spoke of the true merits of a young girl.

"A ribbon, a flower, may be very beautiful," she said, "but it certainly does not make a girl any better; many times it rather lessens her value when she wears it with a certain appearance of vanity." Very quietly, while she thought her mother was not looking, the flower was removed and put in her pocket, and the day after the mother found it thrown away in the corner of a little drawer.

One Sunday she had to go out a number of times; each time she went out, five times in all, she changed her dress; a little too often, indeed. Her mother let her do as she liked, just to see how far the pride of her little girl would go.

But in the evening, when little Maria was in bed and the lights were out, bending over her she inquired gently: "And what beautiful gift have you offered to Jesus to-day? Did you offer Him the five different dresses you wore?" Maria did not open her mouth, but very soon the sound of suppressed sobs came from beneath the coverlet.

Then her mamma put her hand on the head of her little one, and continued sweetly: "My darling, there is nothing quite so silly as a vain little girl. The dress counts for very little; it is the soul that is of value, the intellect and the

heart. We are all so very little before Jesus. We are really nothing."

Poor little Maria continued to sob, but her mother saw that every word she had spoken had gone straight to the heart of her darling, and she remained with her a long time talking of heavenly things. In this wise way her mother guided her little Maria, and before long every trace of vanity had disappeared from the heart of the little girl. To Jesus she entrusted the successful issue of every work she undertook, and to Him referred all the good that resulted. If she received any praise she forgot it at once, or, if she was asked, repeated it with a certain diffidence, as of something that did not concern her.

At this period—that is, during the year 1923—she took part in a competition between the pupils of the higher elementary classes. Over two thousand children took part in the competition, and little Maria obtained the first place. She was awarded a magnificent silver medal, but not a shadow of pride on this occasion troubled the serenity of her soul, notwithstanding the praise bestowed upon her by the authorities and many others present at the distribution of the prizes.

## CHAPTER VII

### A SEVERE TEST

THE health of little Maria at this time was like a see-saw; she had periods which were somewhat reassuring, followed by moments of sharp crisis which plunged the family into the most profound anxiety.

They prayed continually and insistently, beseeching Jesus to cure their little darling; for as yet they could not accustom their minds to the thought of losing her. They would, so to speak, take the Divine Heart of Jesus by storm to obtain this grace from Him. Could Jesus, who had cured the daughter of Jarius, and restored to life the son of the widow of Naim, remain indifferent to the entreaties of Maria's parents? Thus they reasoned amidst these successive alternations between improvement and relapse which brought them to the close of 1924.

Still with the hope of saving the life of their little Maria, her parents consulted a new doctor. He advised them to try the cure of insulin. As

yet this cure was only in its infancy; marvellous things were affirmed of it, and he thought that this insidious malady, which had resisted every other remedy, might yield to this. As yet it had been used very little, and the sick person had to be watched most vigilantly by the doctor on account of the grave consequences that insulin might produce. If she was willing, then, to attempt the cure, it would be necessary for her to enter a nursing home at least for awhile. To leave home to try a cure the issue of which was at least doubtful was a painful sacrifice indeed; but little Maria faced this new trial with her usual serenity, and on January 3rd, 1925, entered the hospital accompanied by her mother.

She was at once taken to the little room assigned to her, together with her belongings. She had brought some books with her and likewise some work. She put the image of the Sacred Heart on the table and the picture of S. Thérèse of Lisieux beside her bed. She arranged some flowers tastefully here and there, and considered how she could use the hours of the days she was to spend there to the best advantage. On the first day she had a great pleasure, as the Father Superior of the hospital came to see her, to whom she made known her desire to receive Holy Communion every day.

She, of course, wrote of her stay in the hospital and of the new cure she was trying to her brother and others, for, said she, " We must not give cause

for anxiety to those who are far away; so then we will write." Certainly she grieved over her absence from school for another period, but she was abandoned to the will of her Saviour. She remained at the hospital some three weeks, and the days seemed long and painful enough; but they were accompanied by extraordinary graces.

Her mother wrote to the nuns at Lisieux, and began a special novena to S. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus. Every morning after Mass the Father Superior brought the Blessed Sacrament to little Maria and her mother. To receive Jesus every day! This was a new experience for her, a grace of which she felt herself unworthy. She received her Jesus with the greatest devotion, and drew from Him the strength to support with admirable courage the cure that was so painful.

"If I was at home," said she, "I should not have this grace of receiving Jesus every day; then I ought to be thankful to be in the hospital."

The injections were made at frequent intervals during these days and she bore them all tranquilly, offering her sufferings for this or that soul; particularly for the conversion of certain persons and for the far-off missions which she had loved since she was a tiny little girl. The sister who gave the injections approached her every time with a certain trepidation, knowing well how painful they were; but little Maria supported them with extraordinary strength of soul, and thanked the sister with

such a sweet smile that she was deeply touched by it.

The other patients had noticed from the first day of her arrival the gracious little girl who passed lightly along the corridors, always smiling and tranquil. They had learned from the sister infirmarian that the little girl was, humanly speaking, already marked for death, and they wondered at the strength and serenity with which she submitted herself to the cure that was so painful, and they felt at once a very great admiration and compassion for her.

And in the morning, as the priest passed their rooms carrying the Blessed Sacrament, they would say: "Jesus is going to little Maria," and more than one felt constrained to offer a prayer or at least an invocation for her.

And little Maria herself, at this time, had not abandoned the hope, almost the assurance, of a cure: "Jesus ought to hear me," she would say in her tone of confident *abandon.* "I have prayed so much; perhaps He cannot refuse to hear the prayer of His little girl?" And Jesus had indeed heard her. He had beheld with pleasure the beautiful little flower which unfolded amidst the thorns, and wished to grow only for Him. For Him only would it give forth its delicate perfume. Very soon, before the winds and rain could spoil it, He would transplant it to His heavenly garden.

## CHAPTER VIII

### HER CONSECRATION TO THE SACRED HEART

FOR a time little Maria had been without any regular confessor. During the time of her stay in the hospital, talking every day for awhile with the Father Superior, she felt the need of his help, and of opening her whole soul to him and entrusting herself completely to his direction. In this way Father Aristide Enea Spilimbergo came to be the director of this little soul.

With exquisite skill he initiated her into the spiritual life. She at once felt a great confidence in her spiritual father, and nourished a strong affection, indeed a profound veneration for him. And he, seeing the designs of God on this soul which had thus been unexpectedly entrusted to him, devoted himself to her with true fatherly care, and laboured that she might become a beautiful plant in God's spiritual garden.

His own character was rather different from that of little Maria, and under his influence her disposition became changed and softened. Her

natural roughness gradually disappeared, leaving in its place a gracious gentleness and sweetness. The insulin cure had apparently produced a slight improvement, and Maria, on leaving the hospital, returned to school again. She was greatly attached to her studies, and it would have been very hard to abandon them altogether ; besides, her condition itself offered no serious hindrance to her studies. So she attended the second classical course, and as before was at the head of her class.

For some years the family had been consecrated to the Sacred Heart, and they decided to renew this consecration with a certain amount of solemnity. It took place on February 15th, 1925, and the function was presided over by Father Spilimbergo. The prayer of consecration, instead of being read by the head of the family, as is usually the case, was read by little Maria, and from that moment the Divine Heart of Jesus impressed itself upon the heart of little Maria in a quite remarkable way. She felt an intense burning love had been enkindled in her soul, and she resolved to please Jesus in all things, and refuse Him nothing that He asked.

In the morning, before going to school, she used to spend a few moments in prayer before the statue of the Sacred Heart ; she committed her daily studies and offered all her works to the Heart of Jesus, and when she returned home her first visit was to Him, giving thanks to Jesus

for the help she had received, and to Him she confided every little incident of her schoolgirl life.

During the day she would stop in her studies or her play for a moment and run to speak a word to Jesus, to offer Him a flower. Hers was indeed a living consecration which could not fail to give pleasure to the Divine Heart. Although at home and attending school by the permission of the doctor, the injections of insulin were continued, and little Maria willing embraced this daily sacrifice. Jesus willed her to be wholly His own through the path of suffering. In May He sent her a fresh trial. The numerous injections had produced an abscess which caused her much pain.

She had already learned to offer every suffering, whether of body or of soul, for the salvation of souls. She suffered, but with a force and courage far beyond that of her age, silently, so that she might not increase the anguish of her dear ones by her lamentations, and no one, seeing her so serene and active, would have believed she was suffering so much.

The scholastic year closed for little Maria with praise from her doctor and amidst the admiration of her companions. On the last day of the school year she returned joyously with her certificate, and ran at once to place it at the feet of the statue of the Sacred Heart, saying confidentially :

" Jesus, the merit is all yours. I thank You ever so much for the consolation You have allowed

me to give to my papa and mamma!" There was no sense of vanity, no shadow of pride in her now. She had become so modest in her opinion of herself that it distressed her when they spoke of her merit, or said something flattering about her, and would say: "I have had so much help, and my companions are better than I." Words spoken with the utmost simplicity and sincerity.

On this occasion an aunt, wishing to give Maria a little pleasure on her promotion, said to her: "Look, Maria, I want to give you a little present; choose what you would like. Would you like to buy something for yourself, or would you like twenty-five lire, or would you like to come with me on a visit to the Madonna of Monte Berico at Vicenza?"

It is needless to say which little Maria chose, and that she had the happiness of receiving Holy Communion at the feet of the miraculous image of her heavenly Mother.

## CHAPTER IX

### "JESUS, DO WITH ME WHAT YOU WILL"

MARIA had begun her holidays joyfully, but Jesus only allowed her a few days of repose, and then came another painful trial.

The abscess, which was supposed to have been cured in May, had been gradually developing unobserved, and she suddenly developed a high fever, and on the evening of July 11th there was an urgent consultation. After a long and careful examination the consulting surgeon gave, as the result of his examination, that it was either tuberculosis of the bone, in which case nothing could be done, or a cold abscess, and then they would have to try the effect of putting the body into a plaster of Paris cast. The case was very grave, and it was as well not to be under any illusion about it.

This unexpected result cast a fresh shadow of anxiety upon those who had experienced so much sorrow and distress already. After a terrible night of agony for poor little Maria, and one scarcely less painful for her parents, she was removed to

the hospital to undergo another examination. As a result of the X-ray, the diagnosis of tuberculosis of the bones was excluded. After remaining a long time on the operating table in great suffering she was finally operated upon without an anæsthetic.

This involved the most intense suffering, not only for poor little Maria, but also for her grief-stricken mother, who stood beside her little darling during the whole time. Dear little Maria bore with heroic courage the by no means brief operation. They had to cut a length of some eight inches along the upper part of the thigh, and the surgeon's knife had to penetrate deep into the wound many times. The fragile little body quivered under the shock, but she held tightly in her hand a little medal, and high up she fixed the eyes of her soul upon Jesus agonizing on the cross, and from her blood-stained lips, between her struggles for breath, no sound came forth save her invocations to Jesus.

After the operation she was taken home, and for twenty-four hours her struggles to breathe were such as to keep her life in constant peril. It was distressing for her loved ones to look at her, and they feared her frail body would not be able to hold out against such an exhausting struggle. Her martyrdom was increased by her leg having been burnt during the operation, owing to a considerable quantity of iodine having been accidentally spilt upon it.

During the brief moments of temporary relief she smiled at her loved ones and pressed their hands as if to reassure them. Before her little bed she had the statue of the Sacred Heart, and nearly always held the crucifix in her hands, while beside her she had the Gospels, and every now and again she offered her sufferings for certain particular intentions.

Jesus sweetened her martyrdom, for her spiritual father came almost daily to console and comfort her, and she was always delighted to see him; a wonderfully sweet expression spread over her pallid face at his coming, and there was such sweetness in her smile! She was contented to suffer.

The surgeon had quite plainly told her mother that her condition was grave enough. The operation had been performed because it was necessary, but the wound, a large one, would be very slow to heal, and if it did finally close it would only be after a long period of time. He did not think it wise to raise any undue hopes that would most likely be disappointed.

The poor mother, her heart wrung with anguish, never left the side of her little martyr for a moment, and only by abandoning herself completely to the Heart of Jesus did she find the strength with which to smile at her darling.

During the hours in which her sufferings allowed her a little respite little Maria was light-hearted

and joyous. She smiled at her Jesus, and with all simplicity said to Him : " Jesus, do with me what You please, but give me the strength to bear every pain well for love of You."

She was always delighted to see those she loved around her bed, and showed herself grateful for all they did for her, and, as if to compensate them for the suffering they endured on her behalf, she daily increased in the virtues of sweetness and gentleness. During one night, when she was unable to sleep on account of the heat, she opened her heart to her mamma who was watching beside her : " When I suffer, you who are beside me suffer with me ; but in those terrible moments I feel Jesus is so close to me. Oh, if you knew what I feel, how united I am to Him when the suffering burns me ! You see, I am content to suffer ; pain is a blessing. Let us thank Jesus together, mamma."

These words made a deep impression on the mother's heart. From that moment she no longer prayed for the recovery of her little angel, but only for a complete abandon to the will of God.

# CHAPTER X

## VICTIM FOR THE SALVATION OF SOULS

QUITE contrary to the expectations of the doctors, Maria began to recover rapidly. Full of gratitude to the Divine Heart of Jesus she magnified Him for all the helps and graces she had received during this very hard and painful trial. To her brother Piero, who in writing to her described her as a little heroine on account of what she had suffered, she replied with great simplicity: "I have not really consulted a dictionary, because, had I done so, I should have found that a heroine is one who has done something great, and I have not saved anyone's life, nor performed any great act, but only some little things. And the merit is not mine; if I have offered my sufferings to Jesus and borne them rather well, I owe it to Jesus, who has given me the strength, and to mamma, who has taught me to know and love Him." *

Twenty days later on she was well enough to

* Letter to her brother Piero, August 15th, 1925.

support the journey to the Trentino, and passed the period of her convalescence in that beautiful region. Maria rejoiced in this improvement in her condition. But Jesus drew her more and more to Himself. She had not the opportunity out in the country to go to church every day, but suddenly she would disappear for a few moments, run up to her little room to say a few words before the image of the Sacred Heart without the family noticing these visits ; in a short while she would be back again, eager to recommence the game with her little cousins, or to take up the work that for a moment she had laid aside while she had been prostrated in an act of love before Jesus.

Her mother was with her, and during the mornings they went out for a short walk along a narrow path in the mountains. Maria always took her little cousin Tonino, who was just three years old, along with her. She held him by the hand as they walked along and talked with him of all those nothings which so much interest little ones. At about the distance of half a kilometre, at a turn in the path, there was a red pillar with a picture of the Madonna and some other sacred figures.

Here was the end of their walk. They stopped for a little rest. Maria pointed out the images one by one to the little boy, who listened and put question after question, obliging her to repeat her explanations over and over again. Then,

gathering some of the wild-flowers growing around the pillar she would put them at the feet of the Madonna. Before returning Maria would make the little one join his hands, repeat a little prayer and throw a kiss to the heavenly Mamma.

Sometimes, going on a little further, they would come to a little church. At this hour the church was usually empty and Maria was very pleased to be able to prostrate herself with the little one on the predella of the altar and talk to Jesus, to the Child Jesus, who lived there in the little golden house, as she called the tabernacle. Tonino opened wide his two little eyes and asked her to open the little door so that he might see Jesus. Maria took advantage of his eagerness and would say to him, "If you are good, Jesus will come out and come here," and she would touch his heart.

At the beginning of the new scholastic year they returned home. Maria's health was not really much improved, but she was eager to begin school again, and return to her studies which she loved so much. But Jesus had decided otherwise. He willed to detach her from all and everything, because He had chosen her for His own possession and destined her for an exclusive union with Himself. He was a jealous lover, and would not suffer the heart of His little lover to have a thought for aught beside Himself, and He would temper her by yet another test.

She experienced a new and most serious crisis

which for days held her suspended between life and death. Beside her bed of pain her dear ones again shed bitter tears, and thither, too, came Piero, whom she had not seen for some time. She was conscious of all, understood and valued all the love that was shown her. Her emotion on seeing her brother again was very intense. In a swift movement of love she found strength to raise herself up in her bed and throw her arms around his neck with a smile like that of an angel. A father from the school came to see her, and said: "Maria, you know Jesus does not will to have you in Heaven yet, because He wants you to be His little victim. To reach Calvary you have still some way to go. Are you contented?"

She smiled sweetly, well pleased if Jesus should choose her for such a sublime mission.

Jesus would give her yet another consolation, for in her little white room, adorned with white flowers, her spiritual father came and offered the Holy Sacrifice. Her two brothers, Piero and Mario, served the Mass, at which, greatly moved, her parents and relatives assisted. In that little room sixteen received Holy Communion beside that bed, on which their little angel immolated herself to God. In her they saw, not only intense emotion, but also intense happiness. In her eyes there shone a light which illuminated her visage and transfigured it, conferring upon it a beauty

and sweetness which was not of this world but the next.

Assuredly Jesus, descending into her loving little heart, had spoken to His chosen bride and asked her to become His hidden little victim, victim of love, victim of suffering for the salvation of souls. Perhaps He Himself, in the brief space of these few moments, had unfolded before the eyes of her soul her mission of sacrifice, shown her the flame which must burn in her heart; and Maria, happy and thrilling with emotion, had accepted all with enthusiasm, and had made a complete dedication of herself to her Beloved.

From that moment she never prayed again to Jesus for her recovery. She simply lived from day to day, committing to the Divine Heart every thought of the morrow; from His Divine hands she accepted every suffering, every cross. The sweetness of that morning remained long in her heart. Some time later, in her journal, she refers to it under the date of November 30th, 1925, where she writes:

"A day of Paradise! Jesus, my Jesus, has descended not into His temple, but into my poor little room. The Divine sacrifice was offered beside my bed, and Jesus came into my heart, and into the hearts of all my dear ones. Oh, the infinite sweetness of those moments. Jesus, who for love of us was with us that day, was not repelled by our littleness, by our misery, and has come down

to us as our sweet consoling Friend. And I, while I was inundated with such great tenderness, and my soul thrilling with love, said, or rather thought: 'Jesus, Jesus, I love you. I cannot say anything else, this day is for me a day of Paradise; make me good, make me holy, all for You, my Jesus! Every breath, every sigh is for You, every beating of my heart shall be the beating of love. Jesus, my Jesus, Jesus my darling, stay always with me.' November 30th, an unforgettable day!"

She recovered rather quickly, and conscious of the peril she had passed through, while she thanked Jesus for the improvement granted, repeated her fiat. This fresh crisis had weakened still more her already fragile body, but it had also tempered her soul and raised her up to heights sublime.

During these days she wrote to her brother: "I am better; for the last three days I get up for a little while in the afternoon. I am very grateful, first to the Sacred Heart and then to our little advocate, S. Thérèse of Lisieux. For the rest I am always contented and happy. I am glad when I feel better, but I accept very readily these little trials which Jesus sends me. Also, on my bed, I can merit to do some good. Remember me before Jesus; I always think of you and offer things for you. The Saviour is so good to me, and with every little blow sends me so many consolations." * And she expressed herself

* Letter to her brother Piero, December 14th, 1925.



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in the same way in a letter she wrote to her cousin from her sick-bed while she still lay there in such danger.

With health somewhat restored she accepted, not without tears, the decision of her parents that she was not to go to school again.

At first she was quite disconsolate, but quickly recovered herself, for she would have more time to think of Jesus, and in the quiet life at home she could study to become better; the little lamb always more gentle.

It was on one of these days, during an intimate conversation with her spiritual father, who asked if there was anything which disturbed her, that she replied: "Look here, it has displeased me very much to leave my studies which I love, and I am distressed that on account of my health I cannot give mamma and papa all the consolations that I would." But then she added: "Jesus wills it to be so."

## CHAPTER XI

### UNION WITH JESUS IN SUFFERING

SUFFERING is the unrelieved blackness of darkness without faith; but how living is the flame, how brilliant the light which springs from suffering borne generously in a Christianlike manner.

The life of little Maria in its sorrowful alternations has always running through it a most pure light which increases as her love becomes more ardent and her union with Jesus more intimate. The peace which reigns in her heart is divine, a grace which is manifested in the gracious sweetness of her character. The cross has fascinated her, and she is glad to suffer and to immolate herself for the salvation of souls. To give, to give without counting the cost, in all simplicity as if without perceiving it, that is her ideal.

She is no longer occupied with study, every breath she draws, every beating of her heart, is for Jesus alone now. With an almost infinite

tenderness and an extraordinary outburst of love she prepared herself for Christmas.

Jesus, who a month before had descended in her little room and marked her for the sacrifice, would not suffer aught to arise in her soul save the burning of love towards Himself. And to her sufferings dear little Maria added gladly other little sacrifices, other little mortifications and little acts of virtue; simple flowers, but pure and sweetly perfumed, with which to adorn the mystical cradle. It will be well to mention a few of them. She took the most unpleasant medicines with the greatest indifference, and no one could have guessed what a mortification they were to her. She had to take pastilles of a very bitter taste which she held in her mouth and absorbed slowly. "Why don't you swallow them whole?" said the doctor; and then, placing his hand gently on the child's shoulder, added, "but you are already above these things." To the water which she had to drink (about two pints a day) a large quantity of carbonate of soda was added, which rendered it very unpleasant, but she drank it without apparently noticing it.

One day a lady remarked to her: "You are very courageous. I could not drink that water," and she answered simply, "O, don't call me courageous for such a trifle." On Christmas night Maria was alone in the house with her mamma; the rest of the family had gone to church for the

midnight Mass. They prayed together, and spoke of the joys and mysteries of this holy night, and then the mamma told her little one to try and sleep quietly.

"Yes, mamma," exclaimed Maria, "I will try to go to sleep, as you wish it, just to please you; but promise me you will wake me at midnight, that I may be able to say a little prayer to Jesus who has just been born." Her mamma promised, and she fell asleep. At the first stroke of the bells, which were announcing the great mystery to the world, she awoke and spent a little time in speaking, with affectionate childlike simplicity, to Jesus of the things nearest her heart, and then, happy and contented, fell asleep again.

Father Spilimbergo relates a singularly moving incident which happened towards the end of this month, which reveals how intensely this delicately sensitive soul felt about even the smallest faults. After the grave crisis through which she had passed she was not able to leave the house, and so she took advantage of a visit of her spiritual father to make a general confession of the year that was drawing to its close.

Very recollected, and kneeling on the floor, she began her confession. Suddenly her voice was broken by sobs. The father waited a moment, and then anxiously asked if she was feeling ill. She said "No," and recommenced her confession. But again, after she had finished the accusation

of her little faults, she burst into tears. The father again anxiously inquired if she was feeling ill or wanted something.

She recovered herself, and in a most heart-broken voice exclaimed: "Oh, how much I have offended Jesus!"

On December 31st she wrote in her little diary: "Another year is over: passed amidst so many trials and infinite consolations: Jesus sends His cross to His chosen ones: then I am one of the little chosen ones of Jesus. Pain and suffering have drawn me closer to Him: I have learned to love Him a little better: I would give Him pleasure by acting like a little child who caresses Him with much affection, and then He will caress me and love me still more. Certainly I know I cannot do any great thing, but I shall see that the garden of my soul is kept clean, and that I only cultivate there sweet-perfumed flowers; the flowers of goodness, obedience, purity and gentleness. . . . And I shall invite the Infant Jesus to come and play there. O, Lord Jesus, you who have surrounded with graces S. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus, S. Rose of Lima and many, many other saints, grant me the grace to love You very much!"

What grace and childlike simplicity shine forth from these pages.

At the beginning of 1926 she merely wrote in her diary an ejaculation:

"Sweet Heart of my Jesus, make me to love You more and more." To love Jesus, to love Him much, and always more, traced the lines of the new year for little Maria.

She desired most ardently to receive Jesus, and recognizing she was unworthy of this grace she wrote an act of profound humility and of confident *abandon:* "If Jesus comes, He will heal my soul."

On January 6th Father Spilimbergo, realizing how great her desire was, brought her Holy Communion. With what great joy and confidence she welcomed her Beloved. Under this date she writes: "Upon earth the magi brought to the Heavenly Child their rich gifts; He, instead, has come to take them from me. I, exulting, have offered Him the gold of my virtue, the incense of my prayer, the myrrh of my sacrifice. And Jesus, notwithstanding my wretchedness, has vouchsafed to accept them and be pleased with them."

Her recovery progressed very slowly, but Maria remained always bright and serene. Compelled to pass a certain part of the day without her mamma, who had to give much of her time to teaching in the school, she accepted the sacrifice, painful as it was to her, with great tranquillity, in order to please Jesus, and also to avoid increasing the sorrow which she knew her mamma was experiencing when duty obliged her so often to be far away from her darling little sufferer. She

accepted with pleasure the company of those friends who thought at times to lighten the tediousness of her solitary hours, and she was full of gratitude towards them ; but of herself she never asked for anyone's companionship. Alone, she was sufficient for herself, with Jesus for company.

She never remained idle. She nourished her heart and mind by reading books that were good and profitable ; devoted herself to needlework and embroidery, played the piano, spent some time on days when she felt a little stronger in doing some work about the house.

In a thousand ways she made herself useful. She was verily a little mother to her brother Mario. She helped him with his school lessons, and many a time by her tactfulness enabled him to escape well-merited reproof. Often, after climbing the trees in the garden, he would run into the house in a deplorable state, his clothing all tattered and torn and his legs cut and bleeding.

Maria, with her quick eye, saw what had happened, kept him out of sight of her mamma, and set about to repair the mischief. She cleaned and medicated his wounds, brushed his clothes, and quickly mended the rents in them, and was very happy if it all escaped her mamma's attention. To do all this she had at once to leave an interesting book she was reading or a favourite sonata she was playing ; but what did it matter if she succeeded in pacifying her brother ?

She was always delighted to give others pleasure, and all turned to her whom they found so quick to do what they desired; she managed to be wonderfully generous, but always in a sweet and gracious manner, devoid of even a shadow of ostentation.

Above all she laboured at the most intimate work of perfecting herself so that she might become "the little lamb always more docile, and always more dear to God." With indomitable tenacity she struggled with her little defects, small enough, indeed, in themselves, but to little Maria in her humility, with her heart wholly given to God, they seemed very great, and she was always grieving that she had not yet completely vanquished them.

## CHAPTER XII

### WITHOUT A SPIRITUAL GUIDE

THROUGH her filial abandonment in the arms of her Divine Jesus, Maria beheld in the smallest happening the disposition of her Beloved, and accepted each thing as a royal gift from His most holy hands.

She was given a little calendar: "Oh! It is Jesus who has sent it me. He wants me to have a special thought for the Holy Eucharist every day. All, all helps to make me good." Her brother had brought her a little book in which, under various headings, she could note her little victories each day. She was inflamed at once with the desire to intensify the work of perfection in her soul, and exclaimed: "My Jesus, I thank You. Continue Your great loving help!"

Completely distrustful of self, but full of confidence in Jesus, abandoned wholly to Him, she advanced quickly towards perfection.

To give pleasure to Jesus she studied well how to suffer, and made good progress along the path

of sacrifice so that it was impossible to note all her mortifications, and that these mystical flowers might be known only to her Divine Bridegroom she strove to keep them hidden even from her mamma, with whom she shared so much of her spiritual experience. But Jesus, Who would have her all for Himself, sent her a yet more difficult trial—a very painful thorn, as she called it. Father Spilimbergo, who had initiated her into the spiritual life, and under whose wise direction she had made such extraordinary progress, was suddenly ordered to another city.

So completely had she entrusted herself to the direction of her spiritual father that, finding herself without his guidance in the first days after his departure, she was confused and bewildered. Although overwhelmed with grief, in spite of her sorrow she was able to say: "My sweet Jesus has taken away my support from me. He Himself has promised to watch over and sustain me. Certainly these first days have been sorrowful enough, because this is the first spiritual cross which the Lord has sent me, and it is a very grievous one. In this month (the month of May) I have given a big flower to the Madonna. She will be pleased with it, for it has been watered with an abundance of bitter tears. But from the Madonna I shall beg for the grace of resignation. My heavenly Mamma will certainly not deny my request. I have written and told her that my littleness

gives me a right to be carried in the arms of Jesus.

"Thus I shall be close to Him, and able to confidently abandon myself to His Divine Heart; He will listen to me and answer with sweet, sweet words of love."

"What joy is experienced in the heart when it finds itself consoled by Jesus! Then the weight of the cross seems lighter, I feel more resigned, and say to Jesus, '*Fiat voluntas tua*, seeking to walk in the little way along which S. Thérèse of Lisieux has trodden." * She confided also to her brother Piero the grief she suffered, and he found words in which to console her: "*Dominus dedit et Dominus abstulit!* This trial is a proof that Jesus loves you, because He would have this sacrifice from you, and sacrifice always opens new sources of merit. He will not leave your soul an orphan."

Alone without any spiritual director, she continued to open her soul to Father Spilimbergo by writing, accusing herself of her little miseries: "I ought to confess to you that often when I endeavour to be more sweet and gentle, and the favourable moment arises to put this excellent virtue of gentleness in practice, I forget and behave badly; I repent at once and cast my misery at the feet of Jesus." † "What a joy it is to me to perceive that I am likened to the little lamb of

* Letter to Father Spilimbergo, May 4th–6th, 1926.
† Letter to Father Spilimbergo, May 8th, 1928.

Jesus. . . . But the little lamb is sweet, gentle and pure, while I am always the same naughty little one, always the same quick temperament. With the help of Jesus, with goodwill, remaining always in the arms of the Divine Maker, close to His adorable heart, I hope to become better." *

Jesus softened the cross with a consolation. Father Rosi, S.J., wrote to her asking her to pray and offer her sufferings for the cure of a little boy who was in a critical condition and had to undergo a difficult operation which left little hope of a recovery. "In exchange for your prayers," Father Rosi wrote, "when celebrating the Holy Sacrifice, I shall put you in the chalice with Jesus. The little victim Maria, with Jesus the Divine Victim!" Maria replied with enthusiasm: "I very willingly unite myself with your crusade of prayer to draw from the most loving Heart of Jesus the cure of this little boy. You see, I am a very little one; I am ill, I do not walk alone, Jesus carries me in His arms. Resting tranquilly near His Heart, I shall whisper many affectionate words to Him. I shall give Him many, many caresses, and the grace we ask will surely be granted.

"To pray to the Heart of Jesus, and to be always asking Him to bestow new graces on those who are in need, is a mission which gives me much pleasure. I am extremely grateful for your kind

* Letter to Father Spilimbergo, May 18th, 1926.

thought of remembering me in the Holy Mass. Ask Jesus to make me very good and wholly His." * The operation was successfully performed and the child made a rapid recovery.

"I give thanks to Jesus," wrote little Maria, "How delightful it is to pray for those in need, to ask graces and graces from the Divine Heart of Jesus! With a little prayer, and then a little sacrifice I give many caresses to my Jesus, and try to draw many graces from His Heart. How delightful it is then to find us, Jesus and myself, alone in the holy chalice, wholly united, and to say to Him: 'I entrust all my joys and all my sorrows to You, I love You, I love You so much! Jesus, make me all Your own!' Jesus and Mary do indeed give me many consolations. Jesus sends her to me. . . . She teaches me to love Him, to pray to Him better, to accept with gladness whatever pleases Him. . . . Even you He has taken from me; I am verily a little sheep that is lost." †

But the little sheep had found refuge in the most loving Heart of Jesus. And never, never would she refuse anything to her Lord, with Whom she lived united in so wonderful a way.

* Letter to Father Rosi, S.J., May 20th, 1926.
† Letter to Father Spilimbergo, May 24th, 1926.

MARIA AND HER TWO BROTHERS

## CHAPTER XIII

### "JESUS WILL TAKE CARE OF ME"

FOR some months longer Jesus left His little Maria without a spiritual guide, and it seemed to her as if Jesus, too, had almost withdrawn from her heart. Jesus slept in the barque, but His little bride was unafraid; she kept her lamp burning, waited and prayed hopefully and truthfully. The Divine Master had taken away her director perhaps the better to reveal the action of grace in her soul. Because through it we possess the correspondence in which little Maria opens her soul to her old director, and as we read these letters we cannot but admire the spirituality, so sound and yet so sweet, which they reveal.

She prayed the Holy Ghost Himself to guide and enlighten her, and in that way she continued her life, so simple yet so full of the love of Jesus. Her day was one intermingled with crosses and privations; they were the flowers she gathered for Him. And if the pain was slight and of short duration she would say, with a certain note of

disappointment: "The flower Jesus wanted is ready, and its petals are falling."

She went on with her interior work of perfection, seeking to give Jesus pleasure by prayer and ceaseless vigilance over herself. She invoked the help of her protectress, S. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus; and of S. Aloysius and, above all, of her heavenly Mother. "I have asked S. Aloysius to give me his virtues, which may make me good, really good, like as he was himself"; and again, writing to Father Spilimbergo, she says: "I constantly have recourse to the Madonna so that she may obtain the grace from Jesus for me to become always better from day to day; His patient, humble, docile little lamb."

Gentleness was the virtue she preferred most of all, but in her humility she was always grieved that her efforts did not have the success she desired: "The Heart of Jesus wills to give me all the consolation possible, and yet I do not respond to them. So many times I am wanting in patience and gentleness. I do want to change and improve myself. A little lamb, especially a little lamb of Jesus, ought to be so sweet and gentle." But, although without a spiritual guide, she lived serenely abandoned to Jesus, and committed wholly to Him; from Him she looked for everything. "Jesus will take care of me; He holds me in His arms and knows what are the needs of my soul."

Maria passed all the summer in the mountains. There was no church to go to, and this was a new sacrifice; but this, too, she made serenely: " I often recollect myself within, or better, in the Heart of Jesus, and remain for certain moments in an act of love." They were moments of intimate consolation which produced in her an immense joy, a joy which, as she said, " was all sweetness."

She only lived for her Beloved. The sight of natural beauty inspired her as it showed her all the goodness and love of God for His creatures. In August, after a fall of snow during the night, she remained almost in ecstasy before the stupendous vision of the mountains covered with snow: " With what wonderful beauty Jesus surrounds us. How much love we ought to give Him in return." And looking at the edelweiss: " I admired this tiny little flower with the most profound emotion, thinking of the infinite love of Jesus."

In the same month little Maria wanted to make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Madonna di Pinè. From Trent the distance was not very long, but all the same, considering her state of health, it threatened to be exhausting; but she was very anxious to receive Holy Communion before the miraculous image, and bore courageously all the discomfort of the journey. Prostrate at the feet of the Madonna, what did she ask? She invoked the benediction of her heavenly Mother upon herself and all dear to her, and that " Jesus

may do what He likes with me, but He must make me good, good, good!"

Her act of dedication was complete; it could not be otherwise, seeing the state of union with Jesus which she had attained. She said so herself. In a letter to her spiritual father she remarks, with a certain accent of sadness, that she was alone in the country, and without the presence of her mamma felt a certain homesickness; but, as if repenting of this lamentation, she added: "Alone, no. I have, above all, and always with me, the company of Jesus"; and she continues serenely: "In the evening, when all are asleep, I direct my prayers to Jesus for myself and all who are dear to me; I find it so sweet praying in the solitude and silence, and very often I prolong my talks with Jesus. I love to read for awhile some pages of the gospels and then to fall asleep with Jesus in my heart and mind."

The Saviour sent her a consolation. A family of friends invited her to spend two days with them at Savai, near Verona. She was delighted, because she felt she would certainly have an opportunity of seeing her spiritual father, who was not far away, and to hear his good counsels once again. And a sweet surprise was in store for her. Her godmother was there spending the period of her convalescence after undergoing a dangerous operation which had given some very anxious days to her friends and relatives.

As an act of thanksgiving to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for having granted her restoration, in the little chapel of the villa in which they were staying Mass was to be celebrated, and they had sent an invitation to Father Spilimbergo to say it. We can imagine the delight of dear little Maria.

With what joy she helped to clean the little chapel and put everything in order after it had been closed so long, that all might be ready on the morrow for the coming of Jesus.

With the greatest emotion, along with her aunt and godmother, Maria went to confession to the good father, and gave thanks to Jesus for the consolation He had afforded her. In the morning she wished to go and meet her spiritual father; perhaps she had something to tell him, and after so long a time wished for a few moments of spiritual intimacy. She set out, but after going a short distance stopped and waited for him at the foot of a large cross.

What better place could she have chosen to open her heart, and to listen to the words of the good father always full of love and confident *abandon* to the will of the Saviour? At the foot of the cross it seemed as if Jesus Himself was speaking to her, and every word went straight to her heart.

It was indeed a joyful morning for dear little Maria; the help and comfort it brought her was

immense, and she recalled it frequently during the days of fiery trial and suffering which were soon to follow.

On October 1st her brother Piero was ordered to go to Rome to continue his studies at the Gregorian University; he was to pass through Padua, and as Maria wished very eagerly to see her brother again her mother called her home. Alas! This first embrace of her little darling was sorrowful indeed for the poor mother. Her quick eyes saw the rapid progress the insidious disease was making and it pierced her heart as she beheld her. But little Maria's smile was so sweet, and her joy at seeing her brother so great, that all except the mother nourished hopes of her recovery; they imagined that it was merely the journey that had exhausted the little girl.

Some days before the family had changed their house, and Maria was very pleased, especially with a little bedroom of white and blue which her mother had prepared for her, in which already she was to have a foretaste of the sweetness of those many intimate hours she would pass there alone with Jesus. Perhaps she had a premonition that this would be the last affectionate embrace she would give her brother here below, but with a strong effort she hid her emotion beneath her sweet smile. It was a most exhausting day, and with her wonted simplicity she admits it: "To-day I have been far from well, but I have forced

myself, so as not to sadden Piero, who must leave almost at once, but I felt very ill."

The same day Father Rosi, S.J., came to bless their new house. The blessing of God descended upon the assembled family, bringing peace and tranquillity to every heart, strengthening and preparing them for the difficult days before them.

" Jesus entered our home with His benediction," wrote Maria later on, " and also, we hope, with the fullness of His grace." After this day of close intimacy, " hours short, but full of sweet satisfaction," Piero departed without having really known how grave was the condition of his sister, and then she went to bed.

And there was a new crisis. On October 25th the surgeon's knife was again to lacerate her poor body. Jesus would come Himself to give her the necessary strength to bear it, and in the morning, by a special favour, Father Spilimbergo came expressly to Padua to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice in the little white room beside the little sufferer.

" How many crosses, how much pain, how much discomfort, we can support serenely with faith," * she writes; and she is so happy, so grateful to Jesus, that suffering itself becomes a joy. Gripping the crucifix tightly in her hand, with her mamma beside her, she endured the surgeon's knife with a courage that was indeed heroic. " The most Sacred Heart of Jesus would give me

* Letter to her cousin, A. Rossi, November 25th, 1926.

a great grace" (she writes some days afterwards). "He would descend into our house and come Himself to me with His benediction, and in his infinite goodness prepare me for suffering. I was really very ill on the 21st, and on the morning of the 25th the Holy Sacrifice was celebrated in my room. You can imagine it all, the holy gladness, the intimate joy, that was in the hearts of all.

"The same day the surgeon performed an operation and cut well into my leg, which I sustained very well, thanks to the immense consolation I experienced in my heart. Certainly Jesus sends us the cross, but we carry it joyfully even when it is heavy. Then He Himself comes to help us with unlooked-for consolations as He has done this time. My father says that I am the chosen little lamb of Jesus, and this gives me great pleasure, and as His little lamb I want to be good and docile. I beg you earnestly to remember me in your prayers. Tell Jesus to remain always present with me, and to give me the grace of a complete *abandon* to His will. I shall return your goodness in the best way I can."

In these days she redoubled her prayers and made another novena to the Holy Ghost for light as to whom she should commit the direction of her soul, and after various inquiries she wrote to Father Rosi, S.J., asking him if he would be willing to become her spiritual director. The father, who had already had occasion to know

something of this elect soul, readily accepted her request, although not without a certain trepidation. Under her new guide, whom she accepted as a gift from God, the young girl continued courageously and joyfully to tread the path of perfection, and the sacred flame of the Apostolate became more and more enkindled in her heart.

"*I ought and I will become an apostle*," she repeated more than once in a transport of enthusiasm, and in the silence of her little chamber she was uninterruptedly consecrated to an Apostolate of prayer and suffering up to the final immolation. The last words of the little martyr reveal her ardent passion for souls, an echo of the *sitio* of Jesus on the Cross.

## CHAPTER XIV

### "IN MY LITTLE BED I CAN BE AN APOSTLE"

SHE returned frequently in heart and thought to that "heavenly morning," to that "sweet day" in which Jesus had descended in her little chamber and entered into her heart, bringing with Him so much sweetness, so much peace and also so great a strength. "I see again in imagination the little altar beside my bed, I see Jesus, all white in the Host, Jesus Who had come down from Heaven all for me," she writes to Father Spilimbergo. "The better to remember that day, I want you to celebrate a Mass in thanksgiving, and that Jesus may make me good and continue not only His protection, but give me the grace of a complete *abandon* to His will."

And she was happy to say that she had chosen Father Rosi, S.J., for her confessor, and that she was very pleased about it.

"He speaks to the heart; it is a delight to listen to him. He repeats the things you have often said to me, and which have done me so

much good. In my little bed," he says, " that I can become an apostle, offering continually to Jesus my suffering for the salvation of souls. Verily now, more than sufferings, it is a question of weariness " (she is speaking of her convalescence), " but I offer Him this also, for then I will keep nothing for myself."

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception was approaching, and she was full of joy. She looked at her heavenly Mother and with loving care gathered and offered to her a beautiful bouquet of spiritual flowers. In her little diary she writes :

" How sublime is the dear Madonna in her white raiment. What mystical sweetness her face and hands give forth ; what purity the rosary at her side inspires. O Mary, protect me, succour me, help me ! " and she studied to model herself always more completely upon her heavenly Mamma, to reproduce her purity of heart and eagerly desired to be her elect little daughter.

One evening her brother brought home a missionary leaflet. It was an appeal on behalf of Albania. Maria used to go out every day for a little ride in the tram. The day after she proposed to walk instead. " But why tire yourself ? " asked her mamma. " I want to walk for the poor Albanians ; but, mamma, you must give me the money for the two rides in the tram." Her mother consented, and for some days Maria continued her sacrifice and was well pleased when she was

able to give her brother fifteen lire for the poor missions.

We come to Christmas, and the heart of little Maria is at Bethlehem—sweet oasis of peace and love. She thinks with the most tender transports of little Jesus. Thinks of God becoming a little child for the love of men and her heart becomes enlarged with love and desire. "It will please me so much to offer Jesus masses of spiritual flowers; to prepare for Him a cradle filled with shining stars; little sacrifices, acts of virtue and love. I would have Him repose not on the straw, but on a soft cushion of perfumed petals fashioned from the sighs and throbbings of love, not in a wretched stall, but in a little regal hall, in a heart pure and burning with love, and I wish this heart to be mine."

She ardently desired to assist at the midnight Mass of Christmas. "Yes, certainly, if Jesus wills it," said her mother to her, and, in fact, the state of her health and the mildness of the weather allowed her to go out. "Jesus is so good and He has gratified my wishes," she exclaimed as she left the house in the serenity of night, and spent a happy hour in the beautiful church at the feet of the Child Jesus, offering Him the love of her heart and her entire being.

Recalling that happy night afterwards she writes: "What a sweetness was diffused, on Christmas night, from the little niche of the

Madonna, all flooded with heavenly light. She took us under her loving care. At her feet the little Jesus smiled at us sweetly and seemed to say: 'Come, come to My arms, in which alone you will find peace and true joy.'" And verily a profound peace and joy reigned in the heart of little Maria. She passed through a period of comparative tranquillity. The Saviour had perhaps granted her a little repose so that with new courage she might venture to climb the last stage of her Calvary.

It was the end of 1926, and in these last days little Maria made a rapid examination of the year that was passed, recalled the various moments when Jesus had put her to the test, how He had abundantly blessed her, filled her with so many graces, and for all these graces received she was infinitely grateful: "Jesus," she exclaimed, "I thank You, I do not know how to make a return to You for all Your great favours."

On December 31st she writes in her diary: "Another year has passed, filled with the thorns which Jesus has willed to intertwine with His roses. More roses than thorns, we can say, because one rose alone suffices to compensate for all our pain. O, Jesus, we thank You for the year that has passed beneath Your protection."

With profound humility she prays to correspond better to His Divine favours, prays not only that her heart may burn with love for Jesus alone,

but with an immense love, pure, fashioned of sacrifice and immolation. The cross, which has always appeared sweet to her, has become dear and desirable. For some time past she had ceased to ask of her Beloved the restoration of her health. She had offered generously every suffering and life itself for the salvation of souls. Now she lived abandoned to Him, and asked ever and always that the grace of *abandon* to the will of God might be complete.

On January 1st, 1927, she writes: "O, Jesus, make me to become holy! I want to be better; to imitate S. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus; I would love you so much. Oh yes, my Jesus, give me a complete *abandon* to Your holy will." The respite lasted a few days longer. The family rejoiced, and gave thanks to God. Maria herself was under no illusions. She knew what her Jesus would have of her; all the same she sought to reassure her parents, and forced herself to add a little gaiety to her wonted serenity.

The home resounded with song; the piano, which for a long time had remained closed, was opened and her little fingers passed lightly over the keys, giving forth sweet harmonies, a reflection of those which filled her heart. She desired so much to receive her Jesus often, but her health did not permit her to go out early in the morning and to remain fasting so long. But Jesus would content her again.

By a special favour obtained from the Holy See she was permitted to go to Holy Communion every day, even after having taken something to drink. Maria was supremely happy: "Jesus has surrounded me with graces and consolations. But I must correspond to them! Ah, with Jesus so often in my heart I fear nothing."

## CHAPTER XV

### GENEROUS ABANDON

A FEW days more of tranquillity and the little victim was once more stretched on her bed of suffering. Amidst the anguish of her beloved parents and relatives she alone retained unchanged her serenity. Two operations were rendered necessary. On January 29th Father Rosi came to visit the little invalid to prepare her for these fresh trials.

"And what if Jesus asks you to suffer again for Him?"

Maria regarded him with a smile.

"If He wants you, for a little while, to share in the agony of His cross? If He asks you to shed a little more of your blood for the salvation of certain souls?"

"But yes, yes!" answered dear little Maria, "I am pleased to suffer. I tell Jesus He can do with me just as He likes."

And the morning following, the better to prepare herself for this new test, and to gain fresh strength

from Jesus she received Holy Communion from the hands of Father Rosi, who also spoke some words of comfort and consolation to her. The surgeon and doctor were expected in the afternoon. All the family were passing through a most distressing time; Maria alone remained joyous and smiling. From her bed by the window she watched the snow, which was falling abundantly, and calmly said to her mamma, "I am sorry that to-day the doctors have not come on account of the weather. I feel so well prepared."

A little later, crucifix in hand, she supported the double operation which was performed, like the others, without any anæsthetic. Her poor father, in terrible anguish, had entered her little chamber a moment before and kissed the white forehead of the little sufferer, with a great effort forcing himself to appear calm and say some words of encouragement: "Fix your thoughts on high, Maria."

"Yes, yes, papa, go; do not fear," and she showed him her crucifix.

She was anxious her papa should not be present during the operations, because intuitively she recognized how much he was suffering, and so would reassure him: "Go, do not fear." At the same time the doctor, in another room, while preparing for the operation told the mother that he found the little Maria so extremely weak that, while it was necessary to operate, he could not

help asking himself, "Can she, in this condition, support two consecutive operations without anæsthetics?" Maria bore the double operation magnificently. Completely abandoned to Jesus, pressing her crucifix to her breast, she drew from Him the force of that heroism that was never wanting for an instant during that terribly painful ordeal. The doctor himself was amazed at her courage and resistance.

When the operation was over and for a moment she was alone with her mamma, who had never left her bedside, she said:

"How good Jesus is! How marvellously He has helped us to bear this pain! I have suffered, but you, mamma, have suffered much more, because to my suffering you have added your own. Jesus has given so much strength to us two. We will thank and bless Him together."

And in the shadow of the little room these two souls united in a prayer of thanksgiving, love and offering. Some days after little Maria wrote in her diary:

"January 30th. What a joy this morning! Jesus came to visit me, and bring me His peace. He made me burn with love! But He would give me a test, a rather painful test. I have had two abscesses caused by the injections; the doctor said two operations were necessary. The same day the surgeon came and performed them. Jesus was my only strength. With my glance fixed on

the crucifix, thinking only of Him, I was able to support everything well. Offering it all to Him I seemed to be endowed with a supernatural strength. But what are my sufferings compared to the torment of Jesus on the cross ? I had my dear mamma with me to help and support me with sweet words of encouragement, and Jesus had only revilings and blasphemies."

It was a long trying period afterwards which little Maria had to pass on her bed. Always immovable, always in the same position, she never once lost her serenity or her joy in suffering. From her beloved little Saint of Lisieux she had well understood that " the little way " is the way of love ; that to love means to suffer, and to walk in this way signifies precisely to live by renunciation, by sacrifice for Jesus ; in a word, that we consider the cross a treasure. And pain, so understood, was sweet to this little victim soul, and from day to day it became more precious to her.

It was a by no means light sacrifice for her to remain for hours during the day without the presence of her mother, but this sacrifice, too, she willingly accepted.

" Go to school and be quite tranquil," she would say. " I am always with Jesus. See, my hours are all occupied. I assist spiritually at all the Masses which are celebrated throughout the world, and I offer them to Jesus for the conversion of sinners. I gather at His feet the sufferings, the

pains, the tears of earth, and offer them, together with all the outbursts of love, with all the virtues, with all the holy desires of good souls. Jesus is pleased. . . . I speak to Him, I tell Him many things. . . . Time passes very quickly along with Him."

The doctors were often perplexed, because everything in little Maria appeared under a new and extraordinary aspect. Her little body, although her face retained to the very last the appearance of flourishing health,* was reduced almost to a skeleton, and it seemed inexplicable how she could possess so great a resistance and overcome such grave and frequent crises which to others whose state was more robust would have been fatal. It was quite incomprehensible that under these conditions she could manifest such energy of spirit, and was able to suffer with a serenity which could only be explained supernaturally. What was the secret of her strength? She had embraced the cross generously and joyfully, as if not feeling its weight, and day by day she followed her Master along the way to Calvary.

She had a thirst for her Jesus, and received Him often. From Holy Communion she drew all her strength, and a blessedness that endured even when she was tried by fresh sufferings. Her expressive little face was irradiated with a heavenly joy when her spiritual director, Father Rosi, spent a little

* See the photograph taken in the last months of her life.

time in intimate conversation with her after Holy Communion, speaking to her of the love of Jesus. Whatever sacrifices he asked of her for her Beloved she accepted readily and happily. He occasionally made little visits at other times, and she was delighted with these spiritual talks which drew her ever closer to Jesus.

She wanted her mamma to be near her on these occasions of true consolation. Her mamma was her confidante and between these two souls there was a complete fusion of heart and mind. Sometimes it happened that other members of the family chanced to be present, and then naturally the conversation lost its spiritual intimacy, and little Maria would not be quite content. "It was a useless visit to-day; an hour lost," she remarked to her mamma afterwards when they were alone.

In this continual suffering the soul of little Maria became more and more purified; she acquired an almost crystalline transparency, a sweetness not of earth, but of Heaven, and her fervent communions left her soul both nourished and famished.

"I do not want to see anyone now who may call," she would say to her mamma. She only wanted to be left alone for some hours in recollection with her Jesus. It was during this sweet intimacy of love that her little heart became inflamed with holy desires. She felt supremely happy, and experienced the most ardent outbursts of sublime love; she would always be the little hidden victim

who offers herself for the salvation of the multitude of souls who will not know Jesus, for the many souls who love Him not, for the many who only offend Him :

" Jesus, do not look at them, but at me, who love You so much." And thus she was happy to be fastened with Jesus to the cross, and with and for Him to die of love.

## CHAPTER XVI

### CONSECRATION TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN

THE ardent love for her heavenly Mother, which little Maria had nourished from her earliest childhood, was greatly increased during her latter days.

"I want to stand always near the Madonna," she said with childlike simplicity. "I want my mother to hold me by the hand and teach me how to please Jesus better." On February 11th, the feast of the Apparition of Our Lady of Lourdes, little Maria would tighten still more strongly her compact of love with the Madonna, and encouraged by her spiritual director, Father Rosi, she offered herself to Jesus through the hands of Mary with a vow of virginity at her Holy Communion.

Only the angels can say what transpired in the little white chamber between Jesus and his chosen little victim. She was happy. In a few words, broken by emotion, she murmured to her mother kneeling beside her bed all the heavenly consolations with which her heart was filled. In her little diary, with her usual simplicity, she wrote :

"February 11th. To-day, Feast of the Madonna of Lourdes, profiting of a visit of Jesus to my heart, I offered myself wholly through Mary, making the vow of virginity. What joy to be always under the protection of Mary, of that dear heavenly Mamma, to be her little daughter, and able to abandon myself in her arms, and press myself to her most pure breast! O, Mary, teach me to walk along the straight way, make me pure and good like yourself! Holy Virgin, shelter me beneath your mantle, and make me love you ever more and more."

Her happiness was intense; she enjoyed this delightful union with Jesus and His heavenly Mother; this life of union was evident to all who entered her little chamber, and were struck by the peace manifested in her serene glance, and the gracious sweetness of her pure smile.

On her bed, always equal, always joyous, she had to remain for many long days, but from every thorn she gathered a rose. Besides the suffering caused by the painful medication of the two wounds, beyond the tediousness of the bandaging which obliged her to remain immovable, besides the continual aggravation, she was oppressed by a terrible sense of suffocation. A cold sweat would break out on her forehead, her strength would be at its weakest, her pulsations rose to 140, and her respiration, short and irregular, became very difficult. Sometimes this went on for hours; yet

through it all, with a supreme effort, she always managed to retain a smile.

When her sufferings allowed her a little interval of relief she nourished her soul by reading the Gospels and the Imitation of Christ, her two favourite books. It was the time of the carnival, and she confided to her mother: "How many offences the Heart of Jesus receives during these days! How many will give themselves to pleasures which will wound and grieve Him. . . . I am close to Him and caress Him. I am glad to be in bed. My sufferings will console Him." And to her confessor, who playfully said to her, "We are in the carnival, and you keep Lent; but you will soon get up and enjoy the carnival," she answered: "I am pleased to stand close to Jesus."

One day a visitor said to her: "You must be tired of staying in bed."

"It never enters my mind to think whether I am tired of it or not," she replied; and to another who asked: "How can you be so contented after being obliged to remain immovable for so many days?" she answered:

"I do not count the days that are passed. Every morning I think that Jesus asks me to stay in bed this day and suffer for Him. Just for one day more, and then I cannot refuse Jesus." In the evening her mother placed the little statue of the Sacred Heart in the arms of Maria and left it with her while she arranged the flowers and

prepared the candles for Holy Communion in the morning. The little sufferer was delighted and caressed it lovingly, pressing it to her heart. One day a visitor remarked: "Why do you place that statue of Jesus, that is so heavy, on your heart?"

"O, mamma, listen," exclaimed Maria. "What a big mistake. . . . Jesus is heavy. . . . But who can weigh Jesus? . . ." and laughing, she held it closer to her breast and kissed it. At the beginning of March she was able to move herself a little and also sit up.

Always active, notwithstanding her extreme weakness, she read some good book which might inflame her still more with love of Jesus. She wrote out some ejaculations of which she was fond, and which rose spontaneously to her lips.

And she also managed to write to Father Spilimbergo. For some time she had not been able to write, and had much to tell him. It was a long letter which she wrote at intervals during several days when her condition allowed her to write. It well reflects the state of her soul at this time.

"Ash-Wednesday. I began really to-day to write to you. I say commenced, because I have had to make several fresh beginnings, as I was obliged to go back to bed. Now I am really well, and it is a great joy to talk a little with you. From January 23rd, as you know, I was suffering much, but from the 23rd Jesus surrounded me with graces. Imagine, in a month Jesus has come to me ten

times. He has deigned to come from His house and enter my little chamber, bringing me such strength and resignation. He has helped me to support well every trial, no matter how painful it appeared to be.

"I am verily the elect little lamb of Jesus! But the little lamb prepared to be sacrificed. I have abandoned myself tranquilly in the arms of Jesus, and I repeat to Him: 'Do with me whatever You like, I am quite content.' Father Rosi calls me little Maria of Jesus, and that gives me much pleasure. But I am also the little bunch of grapes which offers itself to the hands of Jesus for Him to press; I want to be also the little grain of wheat which desires to be reduced to fine flour so that it may become the bread of Jesus. Is not all this beautiful and supremely consoling?

"One morning after Holy Communion Father Rosi said to me: 'Jesus is here, close to you; if He said to you, "I will give you whatever you wish; if you wish to be cured or to continue to suffer, I shall be equally pleased to give you the one as the other," how would you answer Him?' I told him I should ask for the suffering, and he was pleased. What is suffering down here compared with the eternal joy we shall experience in Paradise?

"March 3rd. 'Pain is short, joy eternal.' I found this written in my journal. What a comfort! I am fully convinced of its truth, and accept willingly that which Jesus sends me.

"And now I want to tell you a great secret. I feel the need of opening my heart to you, for you are verily my father.

"February 11th. A date very memorable in my life, a brilliant moment, a great joy, the 11th February, the day of the Apparition of the Blessed Virgin of Lourdes in Holy Communion. I consecrated myself entirely to Mary by the vow of virginity and chastity. You can imagine, my father, what a comfort it was to my soul. Now I am the little daughter of Mary as I am the little lamb of Jesus. Mary will shelter me beneath her mantle. O, surely I shall not fear the tempest thus protected.

"But now I have a greater need of being sustained by your prayers, that I may correspond worthily to the many graces which I continually receive from Jesus and Mary.

"March 6th. To-day makes the forty-fourth day that I have been in bed. The doctor allowed me to get up a little. I am contented, and thank my Jesus so much. All the same, if He had asked me to remain on in bed I would have accepted it willingly. I want always to do the will of Jesus.

"This morning I have received Him again. Ought I not to give Him all my gratitude and all my love? You, father, thank Him also for me. Tell Him I am the little lamb who wishes to rest always, always on His heart."

## CHAPTER XVII

### HER LAST HOLY WEEK

RAPIDLY and inexorably the fell disease progressed. Dear little Maria was like some delicate flower which begins to droop and die. All the same, she got up for a few hours every day, and the whole house seemed brightened by her presence. Holily indifferent now to sickness or health, she gratefully gave thanks to Jesus for this apparent improvement, as for every other good received. Nevertheless, in her outbursts of love to Jesus, she often repeated:

"Remember I am Your little victim, who desires to save so many souls."

And the crises succeeded each other more frequently. She who had been born on a Good Friday, on this, her last Good Friday on earth, was to be made a participator in the Passion of Jesus, and to experience all the bitterness of Calvary. She was agonizing. Her suffering was not merely physical but spiritual. She was confused; her ideas were overclouded, her words

did not correspond to her thought ; her movements were in part paralysed.

She understood that it was the end. She wanted to talk to her mamma, to confide to her of something that was in her heart, but she could not. She was wrung with indescribable anguish, tears flowed from her languid eyes. . . . The change in her expression alone spoke of her martyrdom.

" Jesus, Jesus, let this chalice pass," murmured her mother, pierced by an inexpressible anguish as she turned her pleading eyes towards the Sacred Heart.

Maria's spiritual father was beside her, and his words of consolation entered her little heart. He spoke of Jesus and His heavenly Mother, of her, His little victim, who by her suffering would save so many, many souls.

Maria understood ; her eyes became reanimated, she gave a long, long glance at Jesus. The shadow of sorrow passed, and serenity returned to her heart. Jesus had pressed and pressed His little bunch of grapes, and she had abandoned herself unconditionally to His will and pleasure.

The shadow of this crisis lasted hour after hour. Towards evening a slight improvement began. Maria smiled at her loved ones, and turned a glance of inexpressible sweetness, overflowing with affection and gratitude, towards them. All rejoiced on seeing their darling return to life just when they appeared to be about to lose her, and a hymn

of love and gratitude to God arose spontaneously from their hearts.

Easter came! The festal bells announced the glory of the Resurrection; what holy and shining gladness her beloved parents carried in their hearts after the sad dark days that were passed. Little Maria of Jesus smiled upon all from her bed; she appeared to have issued from this trial more spiritualized than ever. The light of goodness which shone from her eyes gave to her glance, always so sweet, an indefinable power of expression; while her incomparable serenity was a great assistance to her in regaining her strength.

The test had been indeed painful this time. Jesus had pressed and pressed his cluster of grapes, but she is happy now, happy to have had part in the agony of Jesus, to have suffered with and for Him such inexpressible anguish. Through this proof, which quickened her continual immolation, her love became a burning fire, a fire which came from God and went to God, a most pure fire which made it a joy to suffer for the salvation of souls, and make reparation to the most loving Heart of Jesus for all the offences committed against Him.

This living flame which burned in her heart, and was always increasing in intensity, caused her spiritual energy to become gigantic, while the exiled body hastened to its dissolution. It was amazing that she could suffer so much with such serenity; indeed, her soul appeared to be in continual com-

munion with the Infinite. Nothing down here interested her any more. She no longer had any will of her own. It was useless to inquire if she preferred one thing to another; she was indifferent to everything; everything was well for her. For the merest trifle she was quick to manifest her gratitude, and sometimes her mamma noted that this trifle was something that formerly would have afforded her some pleasure.

One day, seeing her looking rather grave, her mamma passed her handkerchief over her forehead, saying sweetly: "We will chase away this shadow." "Shadow! No, mamma," replied little Maria at once, with a smile, "within I always have the sun."

Her gentleness and sweetness, which had become so refined as to be altogether exceptional, had not advanced so far that when her most intimate sentiments were touched she could not express herself with something of her old vivacity.

"Who has changed your little chamber into a little oratory?" exclaimed a friend of the family one day, playfully observing the little altar with the flowers before the Sacred Heart, and the white statue of Our Lady with flowers upon her writing table, and some other holy pictures of which she was fond.

"Oh, but I command here; it is my room!" exclaimed Maria, for an instant returning to the imperious manner of her former years; but she

recovered herself at once, and continued with her habitual sweetness: "I am so pleased to see Jesus and Mary like that amidst the flowers."

Another day a priest, partly to comfort and partly to scandalize her a little, came out with this expresssion: "They say the Lord makes us suffer because He loves and remembers us; but it would be as well if now He forgot us a little, and let you get well." She looked at him with her grave serious eyes, and said: "You speak like that!" If in her presence the conversation turned on some absent person and became wanting in charity, she would not open her mouth, but after awhile would change the conversation, or end it abruptly with: "That is enough now."

She realized fully her condition. Death had nothing of sadness for her, who was about to pass from the state of grace here to the fadeless light of eternity. Her little barque was already near the shore; a few more strokes of the oar and she would be in port.

But Jesus wanted something more of her yet. Courage then, another stroke towards perfection.

Ah! The month of May was about to commence, her last May on earth, and little Maria of Jesus resolved to pass it at the feet of her heavenly Mother weaving a new crown of roses for her.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### "LIKE YOU, MY HEAVENLY MAMMA"

"LIKE you," continually murmured dear little Maria, looking at her Madonna. "Like you; pure like you, good like you," and she never wearied of contemplating her with a happy smile.

At night, together with her mother, she recited the *fioretto* to her heavenly queen. She had gathered very different flowers during the day, for her sufferings had been very acute, but she had made suffering her joy, and offered it all to God for the salvation of souls. Often at night, owing to the suffocating heat and the difficulty of breathing during the oppressions which were becoming so frequent, she could not sleep, but in the morning Jesus was coming into her heart, and the thought of this animated her with new energy.

Wrapped in her white veil, dear little Maria waited her Lord's coming; her mother, beside her, read a few devotional words or murmured a prayer;

Maria listened with eyes closed, wholly recollected within herself. Sometimes the waiting was long; the immobility became very painful, but she seemed as though not to heed it, and when her mamma said to her: "I hope Jesus will come soon," she would answer: "Oh, Jesus knows I expect Him, but I am sure the father will not come yet. He is hearing some confessions"; and it was quite true.

She forgot all her sufferings in her joy at receiving Jesus, and when Father Rosi asked her what sort of night she had spent she would reply radiantly, "Very good!" Whereas, in fact, her sufferings had often been terribly acute. Then her spiritual father would spend some time conversing with her, and would speak of the beauty of the mission of the little victim, the apostle of the Sacred Heart. "You do more good than any preacher; how many souls you lead back to Jesus solely through the offering of your sufferings. Your soul is whiter than the veil you wear. When you have Jesus in your heart you are like a little living monstrance of your God."

She listened delightedly, and then thanked Jesus for this extraordinary gift: "They are all the gifts of Jesus, and when He rewards us He rewards His gifts." No shadow of presumption troubled her profound humility or clouded her serenity of spirit. In the hours of recollection after receiving Holy Communion she recalled what Father Rosi

had said to her, and the better to fix the thoughts in her mind she noted them in her little diary.

"Are you contented to suffer?" the father inquired.

"I am contented to do whatever will please Jesus. To do the will of God is like making a continual communion." Her *abandon* to the will of God was absolute.

"To do the will of the Saviour is such an easy thing," she said. "All we have to do is to leave ourselves in the arms of Jesus and let Him do what He wills. Then all our preoccupations vanish, and everything becomes simple, simple." And she added:

"It is not only the will of Jesus, but His *good pleasure* that we ought to seek; that which will please Him most, and give Him most satisfaction. To say *fiat* is too little; we ought to add our thanks. Our thanks to Jesus because He visits us, loves us, wills us to be close to Him, chooses us to suffer something for Him. And these thanks we ought to give from a verily contented heart with a smile on our lips." It was during these first days of May that some children of another city wrote asking her prayers that they might make their first Communion worthily, and Maria very readily promised to do as they wished.

"This union of souls in Jesus is so beautiful," she said, and she prayed and was ready to suffer anything so that Jesus might bless these little

ones who, although unknown to her, were very dear. On the day of their Communion she wrote :

> " My dear little friends in Jesus. I have gladly prayed and pray to Jesus for you as you have desired. May He, entering within you, fill you with His benediction, and take permanent possession of your hearts so that from this day you may only live with and for Him. I rejoice in your holy joy and your talks with your Divine Visitor, say a little prayer to Him also for me. I am little Maria of Jesus."

She wanted to write also to her brother Piero, and likewise to open her soul once again to Father Spilimbergo, but every effort exhausted her ; all the same, one day, feeling a little better, with an effort she succeeded in writing to both. They were the last letters she wrote.

To her brother she said : " I am really very well, and the proof of it is that I am writing to you. A month ago I battered at the gates of Paradise. The Saviour would not have me. He wants something more of me yet. I am always contented. I have fixed my heart on the Divine Heart of Jesus, I have put myself beneath the protection of my heavenly Mamma, and I am without any preoccupation. I accept gladly the crosses He sends me, and, to tell the truth, I do not feel their weight because He Himself helps

me to carry them. He sends me so many helps and consolations that I am always sustained by His powerful aid and so I cannot help going forward. Jesus and Mary carry me. Just think of it, in the first week of May Father Rosi brought me Holy Communion five times. How few, indeed, amongst the sick have such consolations. Think then with what gratitude, with what love, I ought to repay the most loving Hearts of Jesus and Mary." *

And in her letter to Father Spilimbergo she accentuates the frequency of the visits of Jesus :

" O, if you only knew what joy and what comfort I have experienced in these intimate unions ! My soul opens herself in prayer and in most sweet conversations with Jesus, and experiences a sweet joy which I know not how to express. Jesus has done me the favour of coming many times. Just think that in the first week of May I have received Him five times. What light, what strength I derive from these heavenly visits !

' " My soul,' says Father Rosi, ' ought to be a little white lily nourished by Jesus with His most pure blood, and from Jesus I would really receive everything.

" I am always serene and indeed, I cannot be otherwise with the many consolations my good Jesus gives me."

* Letter to her brother Piero, May 13th, 1927.

Nineteen Communions were made by dear little Maria during this lovely month, and how fervent and inspiring they were. Every day she had some choice gift to offer her Beloved, but every day, too, she asked and urged Him to give her a soul whom she might send to Father Rosi. " Jesus, press me utterly," she said confidentially. " Crucify me ! I stretch out my arms, I offer all to You, but give me souls." And she was indeed happy when she learnt from her spiritual director the effect of her prayers and how continually through her generous offerings soul after soul returned to the most loving Heart of God. Invariably she held her crucifix tightly clasped in her hand even during the night. If during her sleep it had slipped out of her hand and on awaking she found it no longer there, she would search for it in the dark without turning on the light so that she might not disturb anyone. " What is it ? Do you want anything ? " the mother would inquire, perceiving that she had turned in her bed.

" I have lost my Saviour," she would say, quite desolate.

" Oh, poor little girl ! I am coming, I will find Him. Here is your Saviour," and her mamma would hand the crucifix to her with a smile. Maria would kiss it and press it tenderly to her heart, and then try to sleep again.

" To-day I am a missionary," she would say sometimes to her mamma ; so saying she alluded

to the day she had dedicated to the far-off missions for which she always had such an affection, and which she often remembered even in the height of her sufferings.

In the last week of her life the maid who had spent some twenty years in their service, and for whom little Maria had a great affection, had the great grief of losing, in tragic circumstances, her little nephew of two years of age. Maria forgot her own sufferings in her efforts to console her. "Do not cry," she said, "for he is a little angel up in Heaven; you do not see him, but all the same he is quite near us. Do you want always to remember him? Buy one of the poor pagan babies and give him his name; he will be so pleased." Her suggestion was followed, and Maria was delighted to think of the poor little pagan who would be saved.

But who could know or enumerate her continual mortifications and sacrifices hidden beneath her heavenly smile? The heat was suffocating, and she was bathed in such an abundant sweat that it was necessary not merely to change the sheets, but the mattresses to give her a little relief. The light of the lamp fell full on her face and she was asked if she would like it lessened. "O, don't trouble, I am quite pleased"; but when it had been moderated a little it was remarked that she seemed a little easier.

"Would you like me to read a few pages of an

amusing book ? " said one, wishing to give her a little diversion.

" O, thank you, it will be indeed a pleasure," and the mother, who heard the remark, observed that the reading, in fact, gave her little pleasure. She was able to get up a little and sit on the sofa, but so as not to be idle she forced herself to work at a piece of embroidery.

" You are not very comfortable," someone observed, " you would be better with a footstool under your feet."

" O, do not trouble yourself, thanks. I am quite well as I am." A moment after her father entered and sat beside her. He observed the same thing, and placed a cushion beneath her feet.

She thanked him with a smile and said to the others : " Look at my papa." After a very painful injection they were going to give her a little brandy : " No, thank you, instead please give me a little water " ; and, as if to excuse herself, " because I can get it down better." She had a letter from her spiritual father and would have loved to read it at once, knowing it contained some good counsel which would help her much, but she left it unopened and only read it some hours later.

" This is the most precious moment of the day," said someone to her one day, seeing how she suffered. She smiled, and later on said : " The most precious moment ? Jesus knows what it is, but certainly it is not always the moment in which

the body suffers." Only once, during a suffocating day in which the oppression was so great she could scarcely breathe, and, bathed in an abundant perspiration, she was suffering terrible torment, under the pressure of this anguish she exclaimed tearfully: "Ah, I cannot bear more!" But suddenly recovering herself, she said: "Jesus, Jesus, pardon. I am so sorry I said that."

The mamma comforted her. "No, my dear little darling, you were right in crying when you looked at your own strength; but look to Jesus. He will give you strength so that you may be able to suffer yet more." Her brother Mario, occupied by his studies, could not always be with her. She realized very well how much he felt this, as he was always eager to do something for her; so, to give him satisfaction when he was about her, she asked him to do a number of little favours for her which she kept in reserve for him.

"Mario gets the medicine ready so well," she would say. "Mario arranges the light for me. Mario helps me, and carries me so gently that I never feel the least discomfort." School kept Mario away for many hours from his beloved little sister whose loss he knew was very near, and that realization made him unwilling even to leave her room, and he always asked to take the place of her mamma when the family were at meals.

Without tiring her he had always something to tell her about his school life, and something to

interest and divert her. Watchful, loving, patient during these short intervals, he surrounded her with so much care and such tenderness that little Maria could not be other than happy. Every little act of gentleness she accepted with that smile which was habitual with her, even when it was something contrary to her own taste, and every little thing she wanted she asked of him with the sweetest grace.

It was no longer the mamma who guided and corrected her little darling, but it was Maria who, sometimes hearing her mamma give her order in a not too gentle manner, would recall her with a look and a most sweet " Mamma," which was both a prayer, a warning and a caress. In her last days she asked for nothing, and it was a work to divine of what she was in need ; if one insisted to know what she wanted, she would say : " I beg you do what you think best, all goes well with me."

Long hours were passed in silence while Maria, with a heavenly smile, kept her eyes fixed on the Madonna, and especially in her last days on earth her mother noted in the little victim, already fully matured, such an irradiation of love that she seemed as if transfigured. Day by day she was losing contact with earth, and her soul seemed to taste already something of the sweetness of the beatific vision.

## CHAPTER XIX

### HER JOY IN SUFFERING

PERFECTLY conscious of her state, she not only foresaw but was assured that her end was near. She did not speak of it, so as not to distress her relatives, and only to her mamma, with whom she had no secrets, did she refer to it indirectly.

"When I shall be in Paradise I shall always stand close to my heavenly Mamma; but I shall also look down. I shall look at you." Another time she said: "In Heaven I shall always pray to Jesus for you. Oh, I shall steal from the Divine Heart so many graces," and laughing at this "steal," she went on—"There it will not be to steal because there are no commandments in Heaven. Death does not make me afraid; it is the beginning of life. Here . . . I feel Jesus. . . . I love Him, but I do not see Him. In Heaven I shall feel Him, see Him, love Him and stand close to Him." And in a book of the thoughts of S. Thérèse of Lisieux she had underlined in

pencil those which seemed most to appeal to her heart, and especially to her love and her joy in suffering.

We quote a few:

"All our works, even the most splendid, without love are nothing."

"Because I am weak, little Jesus has abased Himself to me, teaching me sweetly within the secrets of His Heart."

"The heart, in giving itself to God, loses nothing of its natural tenderness; that tenderness, on the contrary, always goes on increasing and becomes more pure and more divine."

"We who run the way of love should never torment ourselves about anything."

"It is due to us to console Jesus, not for Him to console us."

"A little victim of love never ought to find that horrible which her Bridegroom sends her. I live from moment to moment which I can just support—not more; and if in the successive instant He increases my suffering, He will also increase my strength."

"Suffering united to love appears to me the only thing really desirable in this vale of tears. I only find resignation needful in order to live. To die is the joy I would experience."

"What a thirst I have for Heaven, for that blessed sojourn in which I shall love Jesus without reserve. But, to gain it, it is necessary to weep

and suffer. Very well! I will to suffer all that my Beloved wills me to suffer, and I would leave Him to do exactly what He likes with His little ball. No, it is not death who will come to take me, but the Lord. Death is not a phantom or some horrible spectre, as it is commonly represented in pictures."

"We read in the Catechism that death is the separation of the soul from the body; is it not so?"

"Very well, then, I have no fear of a separation which shall unite me for ever with God. If I see him in the distance (the Divine Thief) I shall look at Him well, and instead of crying 'Thief,' I shall say to Him, 'Come here, come here!'" It was certainly after one of her acute crises that so often tortured her during the last days, that she recognized herself in the following passage:

"Her face was covered with an abundant sweat . . . she trembled in every limb, but like the strong man in a furious tempest, the pilot only a short distance from the port, does not lose his courage, so this soul, full of faith, seeing herself close to the shining lighthouse of the eternal shore, gave the last strokes to the oars by which to reach the eternal harbour."

Lying on her bed of martyrdom, and at certain hours seemingly in her agony, but always holding the crucifix pressed firmly to her heart, it was her arms, her strength. She seemed lifeless, but

instead her soul within was constantly making outbursts of love to her Beloved, who was near her with open arms ready to press her to His Heart. And during the night, between the brief intervals of repose, she was always united to Him. Her mamma would give her some medicine or other; she would take it, and before trying to sleep, say: "Let us give another embrace to Jesus. We will make a spiritual communion," and many times during the day alone she would repeat this embrace.

During one of her last days, at a moment when her sufferings allowed her a moment's respite, she wrote with a pencil a single thought which reflected her state: "Outwardly there is an apparent inertia, while within there is a phenomenal activity." To her usual sufferings, already so acute, during her last days was added fever—a burning continuous fever, always above 103 degrees. In a short while it consumed her fragile body; her pulsations varied from 130 to 150 and even more. It was the end.

The little one had no more brief moments of relief; yet the peace of her spirit was shown without through the serenity of her glance, which gave the impression that her state was not so serious in spite of the fever.

Already throughout all the days of May she had made a daily offering of herself, asking souls in exchange from Jesus and Mary. On the last

day (of May) she insisted more strongly: "Jesus, do with me what You like. To you, my heavenly Mamma, I offer all my continuous suffering; the suffering of to-day is the ribbon with which I bind together all the flowers I have gathered for you during this lovely month. In exchange give me a soul. Send to-morrow 'a big fish' to Father Rosi." And Jesus and Mary heard the prayers of their little lover. It was towards the close of the day; her spiritual father was standing in the church when a lady asked to speak to him. The father received her, and almost directly began speaking of the hidden little victim who on her bed of pain suffered and prayed that souls might return to the Heart of Jesus.

The lady was disturbed, profoundly moved, and asked to go to confession. From other sources he knew already that for forty years she had lived estranged from God. That evening her spiritual father announced to little Maria that Jesus had sent "the big fish" which she had asked of Him. Thrilling with emotion, with a sweet smile she looked at her Jesus: "How good You are!" she exclaimed. "I am so contented to suffer for you."

The fever never left her for a moment, but, regardless of herself, she only thought of others; that those who nursed her might not get too tired. Her one desire was that her mother might always be beside her. One day her spiritual father, seeing her so oppressed and fighting for breath,

said to her: "Tell the Madonna to take away the fever." She regarded him with a smile, but made no answer.

In the evening her mother saw she was a little preoccupied.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The father told me to ask the Madonna to take away the fever."

"And you are contented to say it?"

"No, not much."

"Well," replied the mother, "put it this way. My Mamma, the father has told me to ask you to take away the fever, but you do what you like."

She smiled, contented and tranquillized, but the following morning, when the father asked her if she had made the prayer he had told her to, with all sincerity she replied:

"Really, I have not."

"Like you," little Maria had repeated continually through the lovely month of May, and she began the month of the Sacred Heart by often repeating the act of her complete dedication, *Fiat voluntas tua.*

Ah, this month of her Jesus, she knew it well; she was to begin on earth but she would finish it in Heaven along with her Beloved. By chance, in the days preceding it, she had talked about Extreme Unction; in the afternoon of June 1st she confided to her mother her wish to receive this sacrament.

To Father Rosi, whom she had asked to come, she unfolded her thought: She wanted to be all for Jesus, all pure, completely abandoned to Him. She desired to receive her Lord under another form, and begged him to administer Extreme Unction. Her only anxiety was that her father should not be told, and she asked that for the moment no one besides her mamma might know of it. Her spiritual father regarded her a moment with a look of surprise, but said at once, "Yes, yes; very well, little Maria, I will do it willingly, but tell me, are you perhaps afraid to die?"

"Oh no, father, death has no fears for me," replied the dear child with a sweet smile. "It is Jesus who will come to take me, who opens His arms for me; how can I be afraid of Jesus?" The father, deeply moved, asked her when she would wish to receive the sacrament, and she answered in all simplicity: "Just now, when the fever is not so high and I can follow with greater attention the prayers, and also because now papa is out, so he will not be troubled." So Father Rosi went out, promising to return with the holy oils in a few minutes.

Meanwhile her father returned home unexpectedly, so it was impossible to keep secret from him the wish of little Maria. Greatly moved he went up to the little chamber of his darling child, embraced and kissed her, murmuring: "Even this my

darling little girl wishes. My brave Maria!" and he hurriedly left her so as not to give way to his emotion. "Oh, mamma, papa, too, is contented. My Jesus has given me this gift as well," she exclaimed, with an expression of radiant happiness.

A few minutes later Father Rosi returned. Maria, serene, smiling, but with devout recollection and holy fervour, followed the prayers which are recited during the administration of this sacrament, making the responses herself and then repeated them in Italian.

It was no sad ceremony but something redolent of Paradise which was performed in that little room where every heart was throbbing with emotion. The father said he had never assisted at a festival of such intimate joy. Little Maria had nothing earthly about her; she was like an angel, and pure and full of love as the angels are.

## CHAPTER XX

### FIAT VOLUNTAS TUA

THE little victim was ready for the last hour; she had attained such a height of love that it was easy to see that for her the Divine day was about to dawn.

She passed the second day of June, like the first, always in great pain, always oppressed by her struggles to breathe, and consumed by fever, but never a complaint, never a sigh. Sublime in her sacrifice, she appeared to draw strength from this agony of suffering as if it were a fount of joy; and always her sweet gracious smile cheered and, at the same time, deceived them all.

"*Fiat voluntas tua*," she repeated often, looking at her Jesus. "Oh, press, press still more Your little cluster of grapes." On the morning of June 3rd, her last in this world, she as usual received Holy Communion. While the father held the Sacred Host before her, her eyes were fixed upon it with the most ardent love and desire. Afterwards, for a long while, she remained very quiet

and recollected within herself. Her mother asked her if she suffered much. "It is His day," she replied; "the first Friday of the month. I have told Him that to-day He can do with me whatever He wants, that I am ready for everything, but that He must give me souls."

The doctor saw her at ten. Her state was grave, but he did not foresee how near the end was. At two o'clock she was suddenly stricken with a prolonged attack of shivering.

"Courage, courage," said her mamma to her, "Jesus wills to press you a little more," and she gave her what she thought would be helpful, and at the same time sent an urgent call for Father Rosi and the doctor. Maria always maintained her serenity; the anguish increased from moment to moment, and the attacks of shivering were more frequent.

Her spiritual father came at once, and spoke long and affectionately with her, then gave her absolution and the plenary indulgence. "What if Jesus wills to gather His lily to-day, Maria?" With a heavenly smile she replied: "Yes, yes. He will really do it. I am content. *Fiat voluntas tua.*" "Ah, you go to rejoice in Paradise," continued her spiritual father, "but you will remember us? Your mamma, your papa, your brothers? And you will remember me? I am your father and you are my spiritual daughter; remember the pact we made together. You will be the little

protectress of the college, and draw down the blessings of the Lord, and watch that so many young boys may grow in goodness and always tread the path of virtue? You will remember your promises?"

"Oh, yes, father, I shall remember all; also in Heaven I shall imitate S. Thérèse and watch over you always," answered the dear child, with her winning smile. Her condition grew steadily worse; neither the frequent injections nor the oyxgen brought any relief.

At a certain moment she pushed away the mouth of the oxygen tube, exclaiming, "Enough!" and then, suddenly, fearing she had committed an act of disobedience, she said to the doctor anxiously:

"Have I done badly, doctor; have I done badly?"

"No, no," he replied. "It is quite well, just rest a little." Her poor father approached the bed, stricken with grief; he would kiss his little angel, who was just ready to fly off to Heaven, for the last time. She understood all the anguish of his heart, she looked at her Jesus with an ardent invocation, then followed with her eyes her poor father as he hastily left the room in a vain endeavour to hide his sobs and tears, followed by Father Rosi. She placed her head on the breast of her mamma and softly murmured: "I hope, I hope that my Jesus and my spiritual father will console my papa."

Each moment her breathing became more difficult. Suddenly she rose up and made a movement as if to leave the bed, saying: "Wait a moment, so I can breathe more easily," and she took the mouth of the oxygen tube in her two hands, holding it to her mouth, trying thus to breathe more freely.

"No, no, Maria, my darling little girl, do not tire yourself," said her mother, caressing her. "Look at your Jesus. He wants you to be calm."

"Ah, Jesus! I can suffer a little more for Jesus," she said in this moment of supreme agony; then "yes, mamma," and she put down the mouth of the tube and was quite calm. The end was close at hand. The father asked her if she would like to receive Jesus again by way of Viaticum.

"Yes, yes, father, bring Him to me, and give me all, all that you can."

The Father went out at once to the church to fetch the Blessed Sacrament. During the few brief moments of his absence the little martyr gathered all her force and energy in a supreme effort; she rose up, half sitting on the bed, with her eyes shining like stars, her face radiant with heavenly light and a sweet smile on her lips. "How beautiful!" she exclaimed. "I am pleased, so pleased! And you, mamma, you are pleased? We are all contented! And have we not reason to be contented? But if you would all be contented do what I tell you. I am pleased to have done what I could to please Jesus. But all, all ought to do

all they can . . . all . . . all the world. . . . Oh, if all the world would do what they could, how they would content Jesus! All . . . all the angels . . . all . . . mamma . . . ma . . . ma . . ." and, utterly spent by this last passionate outburst of love, she fell back helpless and exhausted, but yet conscious, upon the pillows, unable to utter another word.

At this moment Father Rosi entered with the Blessed Sacrament, but the ardent little lover had spent all her strength and no longer had power to open her mouth, so she could not receive her Beloved. Ah, she could not satisfy her last desire of receiving her Jesus once more so that again she might be the little monstrance of God! By a sudden spontaneous inspiration Father Rosi said to her:

"Maria, you cannot receive again your Jesus whom you love so much. See, He is all yours," and he placed the pyx above the hands of the little darling, and left it there till she breathed her last.

For two hours and a half the little victim lived on surrounded by all those dear to her, and assisted with the most loving paternal care of Father Rosi.

Occasionally he spoke to her, saying: "Little Maria, you know Jesus is resting on your heart? You are the little monstrance of God. Courage, in these last moments of suffering . . . just await

for a little the eternal joys. . . . Jesus and your heavenly Mother open their arms for you. In Heaven be mindful of us all. Maria, we are all close beside you, remember us all . . . " And he sprinkled her with holy water and continued to repeat ejaculatory prayers and invocations. And beside this sweet child in whom God was fulfilling all His loving designs, all were praying and, amidst the anguish with which they were pierced, adored Jesus, Who was resting on the heart of His little bride.

At a few minutes after nine o'clock Jesus, living and glorious, was present, and gathered His most pure lily to Himself. Bitter tears were shed over the little fragile body, which had been the centre of such intense spiritual energy and such ardent fire of love.

But in the midst of their immense grief there was an ineffable serenity, a supreme peace, begotten from the supernatural certitude of her glory, which inundated the souls of all. It was the first smile little Maria bestowed on all those who were so dear to her on her entry into Heaven.

They prayed and recited the *Te Deum* because verily a new angel had entered the court of God's elect. Dressed in white as on the day of her first communion, with her white veil the dear little girl rested on her bed amidst an extraordinary profusion of flowers, especially lilies, for over sixty hours without the slightest change appearing

in her worn body, notwithstanding the suffocating heat of these days.

The doctor had been asked, immediately after death, to make some injections to retard decomposition, but he unhesitatingly refused. He experienced such a sense of veneration in the presence of the body of this little girl, who had given so many wonderful examples of saintly heroism, that he felt even to touch her now would be a profanation. There was a stream of relatives, friends and acquaintances passing through the little white room. They would see once more the little martyr, the sweet little girl who in this brief space of her years had done so much, because she had suffered and loved so much. Besides the little martyr who had always embraced the cross, and immolated her young life for the salvation of souls, they would pray and beg her protection.

They touched her with their rosaries, their medals and pictures. The Monday following, June 6th, the day of the burial, was indeed the triumph of darling little Maria of Jesus, both through the concourse of people who assisted and the profusion of flowers with which she was surrounded.

Her spiritual father, who had so lovingly and wisely directed Maria in the difficult ascent of Calvary, gave his last blessing before the body was enclosed in the coffin, and assisted at the burial. The lily gathered from earth was giving its fragrance in Heaven.

Dear little Maria had finished her Apostolate of suffering here below; now she continues her work from Heaven. She has kept her promises and continually helps, protects and supports those who turn to her. Her mission of leading souls to Jesus continues.

## CHAPTER XXI

### AFTERWARDS

IN the short life of little Maria there were no extraordinary happenings, yet her whole life, in its simplicity, is in itself extraordinary.

Little Maria had learned quickly in the school of the Divine Heart how to suffer, and suffer well, for the salvation of souls, and she was glad to suffer as she beheld the flowers which her suffering produced; souls returning to Jesus. Beneath her habitual smile she kept hidden the sacrifices in which she found her happiness. Well may she be called after the expression of S. Paul: "the good odour of Christ."

Approaching her, one experienced a strong call to tread that "sure way" which she had followed in its entirety in so short a time; from her bed of suffering she was an eloquent preacher indeed. The impression which her death had made on all who knew her increased from day to day and, diffused far and wide, became transformed into a veritable veneration.

She was more living than ever, and by means of these simple memories she continued her preaching.

"The lives of these holy children will do so much good," said the Holy Father in a gracious reference to the life of little Maria. And the words of the Holy Father find an echo in the innumerable letters which have come from all sides, from every class and every age. It is needless to repeat here the words of Cardinal Laurenti, because they appear elsewhere.

Mgr. Della Pietra, Apostolic Delegate of Albania, writes: "A little soul in the little way; little, but the way of love and sacrifice is the way of souls spiritually great. And God, Who regards the desires of these souls who have generously spent themselves, and taken them up to Heaven, will concede to them more readily there than when on earth the graces they ask for us."

"I have read and re-read it," writes a religious of the life of little Maria. "A soul so little and so beautiful, so small and so rich. To read these pages is like enjoying a fresh spring morning."

A priest writes: "I have read many times the book of little Maria, and have got many young girls to read it, who were so enraptured by it that I have been obliged to get a number of copies to distribute, because all wish to keep the precious little volume. I hope its reading will do much good." "I cannot read these pages," writes a

sister, " without weeping and a sense of shame that I, who have had so many years of religious life, have not yet acquired the heroic virtue of this little girl. I envy and invoke her."

" I beg and pray," writes a mother, " that this sweet Maria will take my little boys under her protection and make them very good."

" A little soul made great by the splendour of love, of suffering, speaks to the heart with wonderful power," writes a teacher. " Reading it, I suffered and rejoiced. Suffered at the thought of the tremendous martyrdom of this sweet child ; rejoiced at her reward.

" Now amongst the blessed she looks down smiling with that wonderful sweetness which, when alive in this world, seemed a ray of love which came rather from her eyes than from her lips. Dear little one, assist me with a strength which time can never diminish."

A young girl writes : " Little Maria was verily an angel, the sweet little lamb of Jesus ! I read her life to my little ones whom I am instructing in Christian doctrine ; all are in admiration and eager to imitate her. I have taken her as a model for myself, and shall make others know and love her too." But little Maria is not only loved, but invoked. A cleric was seriously ill. His spiritual father gave him a picture of little Maria and urged him to ask with confidence the grace of a cure from the Sacred Heart through the intercession

of His little victim. He began a novena and was convalescent before it was ended.

A lady was grievously ill, and the doctor said there was only the hope of a slight improvement after a long and patient cure. The family prayed little Maria to intercede with the Sacred Heart. A few days passed and the patient felt better; she underwent a new examination and the doctor, to his great surprise, found her cured. "It is certain," writes her husband, "that the illness of my wife, thus so suddenly cured against every expectation of the doctor, is due to a superior intervention. Little Maria has willed to send us a rose, and how sweetly perfumed."

A young girl who lived far from God, surrounded by irreligious people, read by chance a short account of little Maria. This interested her and made her think. She had a sharp struggle with herself, but finally went to confession and received Holy Communion. A poor mother was in an agony of grief over a series of family misfortunes, and especially at the bad conduct of a son which made the home an inferno. She got a picture of little Maria and entrusted to her the conversion of the one so near to her heart. Some time passed, and things became worse. Little Maria was not willing to grant the peace she so much desired? She persisted in her prayer and, finally, she writes: "We enjoy the peace which we have so long desired. The Sacred Heart, through the inter-

cession of little Maria, has consoled us and given us peace when least expected and in a way unlooked for. We give thanks. . . ."

"My mother was so ill," says a young girl, "and suffering that she did not know how to endure it. Only to speak of resignation excited her. I prayed so much to little Maria to grant to my dear mother a little of that serenity which she always retained amidst her terrible sufferings. I was heard at once."

A picture of little Maria, through the goodness of some pious soul, reached the hands of a poor prisoner who through neglect of his religion had deadened his conscience, and had before him long years of imprisonment in which to expiate his crimes. He was moved; the sweet image became an immense comfort; he felt less miserable, and during the long hours of the day kept the picture before him and prayed.

"I groan within myself for the false conceptions of the past," he writes to the one who sent the picture, "and little Maria always enters into my prayers, and I ask her to intercede for me to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Blessed Mary, and ask their protection upon my ruined home.

"I invoke her for my spiritual good, and that of my dear ones, and especially to help my fellows in misfortune. Certainly she prays, and has prayed specially for me, and has been so good as

to come in a picture close to me, understanding how much I wished to possess one."

A young girl of twenty was in a most grave condition in a nursing home, her days were numbered. She was overwhelmed with sadness. In moments during which she had some respite in her pain she read the life of little Maria and at once found her feelings changed; a great peace flooded her heart, and she said confidently: "I shall prepare to die like little Maria."

A lady who had heard about the little lover of Jesus, who was tried by the most terrible crosses, asked her intercession for a most troublesome affair which she had at heart and had prayed for its solution for many years. In a few days the grace was granted in such a marvellous way that she felt compelled to write and make known her gratitude.

A barrister writes: "I express the hope that this little book may be spread far and wide through thousands of hands, bringing everywhere consolation and drawing many, many souls to God.

"I hope that this candid soul may soon shine from our altars and tell the world, like S. Thérèse of Lisieux, that the way to Heaven to-day—as yesterday—is traversed along little ways fragrant with the flowers of simplicity and suffering, not less beautiful, not less fragrant than those of the greater figures of Christianity."

## CHAPTER XXII

### NEW SMILES FROM LITTLE MARIA

WE select here and there, from the many letters that come to us, a few of the smiles from our little Maria which clearly show she is not unmindful of her promises.

From Trento, October 21st, 1929, D.L. writes: "Little Maria would favour even me with one of her smiles, all the more precious because one intimate and spiritual. Besides, I have been heard for a grace asked from the Sacred Heart through the intercession of little Maria. My mother has suffered gravely for over two months from a twisted knee. From the day I began to pray she began to get better." From Mantua, C.M. wrote, July 31st, 1928: "I cannot resist the desire to tell about a grace received through the intercession of little Maria. My mother had a complex series of ulcers on the legs which gave her acute torture and threatened to become cancerous. After some days they formed a horrible, terrifying wound above the left ankle. Full of fears, and keeping shut up in my heart a sad premonition for my suffering

mother, I promised to make known the cure if there was an improvement within three days.

"A wonderful thing happened. After the third day the wound was healed so perfectly that it was difficult to trace where it had been. Together with my mother I thank God Who through the intercession of little Maria has given a grace which has amazed us."

From Treviso, September 12th, 1929, M.C. wrote: "My daughter was grievously ill with bronchial pneumonia and reduced in a few days to a pitiable condition owing to supervening complications and a cancerous growth which made an operation necessary. Hastily removed to the hospital, it was feared she would not live through the night, and the last sacraments were administered. Agonized, but full of faith, I placed beneath the pillow of the sufferer the picture of little Maria, earnestly begging her to obtain the cure of my beloved daughter. Long days of anxiety followed, but my faith did not waver, neither did that of my daughter; and little Maria heard us. To the wonder of the doctors, who had given up all hope of saving her, she commenced to get better, became convalescent and progressed rapidly towards complete recovery. With a heart full of gratitude I make known the grace received."

From Padua, September 18th, 1929, N.N. writes: "It is with the most lively sense of gratitude that I make known that through Mary Immaculate,

S. Joseph and Maria Filippetto, an old lady of seventy-three, who had not been to the Sacraments since her first communion, taken seriously ill, willingly returned by the grace of God before undergoing an operation." "For some time there has been no peace in my home," writes C.R. from Padua, July 23rd, 1929, "and I suffered acutely. I turned with great confidence to little Maria, begging her to intercede before God that the peace of former days might return. The little saint listened to my prayers and the peace returned; it was indeed a great grace because the causes of the disagreement were very grave."

N.N., from Padua, August 31st, 1929, writes: "I was in a state of great agony beyond belief. Someone infinitely dear to me was passing through a most painful crisis; she was really in despair. So I said to Maria, angelic little one, 'If, as I believe, you are beside God, grant that peace may descend upon our hearts, and make that which seems impossible to happen.' A few hours after the most serene peace entered both our souls."

B., writing from Padua, October 20th, 1929, says: "A member of my family was stricken by the most grievous adversity which plunged her into the blackest night. We prayed and implored but found no way of escape. We were told about little Maria, and I went to her house, visited her little room, and, inspired with new faith, begged her to be our intercessor with the Sacred Heart.

"Long days of anxious waiting and incessant prayer followed, but finally little Maria heard us. The question which caused us such grief was happily solved, all our sorrows were over and joy returned to our hearts. With hearts overflowing with gratitude we thank our little protectress." M., from Padua, October 15th, 1929:

"For a long time I have prayed insistently to the Sacred Heart for the conversion of my sister, of whom for a long time I have had no direct news, but whom I feared was leading a life of vice and shame. Full of confidence I turned to little Maria, asking her to obtain from the Sacred Heart the salvation of this soul which I had so much at heart.

"After some months of prayer I had a letter which informed me that my unfortunate sister was in the hospital of R., and immediately I went there. What grief pierced my heart on seeing her in such a sad state. The prodigal son, far from the father's house, had spent all his earthly riches; this unhappy child had spent something far more precious. But the poor little lost sheep, stricken by grace, returned to the arms of the Good Shepherd.

"She recognized her folly, the misery of her condition, was reconciled to the Saviour, and made a serious resolution to amend her life and strive to repair all the evil she had

done. With a heart filled with love and consolation I have devoted myself to helping her in her good purpose.

"I am filled with the most lively gratitude, and desire it to be known that this wonderful conversion has been obtained through the intercession of little Maria.

"I invoke her constantly and trust she will not refuse to plead for me to the Divine Heart of Jesus."

Padua, October, 1929: Mrs. Z., mother of a large family, was taken ill with cancer in its acutest form. With great faith she invoked the protection of Pius X of saintly memory, whom she had known personally, in order to obtain her cure. But the grace did not come because the Lord had disposed otherwise. In the midst of her sufferings there fell into her hands the life of little Maria, especially appealing to her, as she had known her. She read the story greatly moved, and it made her think much. A conflict between opposed feelings arose in her soul. Finally, with an admirable movement of faith and love, she turned to the dear little girl, saying:

"Little Maria of Jesus, I turn to you. I have had a great desire to be cured, not for myself but for my family, to whom I felt I was still needful. The Lord has not seen fit to grant this to me through Pius X, whom I so much love and venerate.

Obtain for me the grace of a generous resignation to the will of God. Give me your serenity in the midst of my sufferings, which are so great."

She felt her last day was at hand ; the separation from her children, to whom she had consecrated an active and devoted life, was never so painful, but her sacrifice was irradiated by a most extraordinary serenity. After a grave crisis which left her in great agony she asked to see the mother of little Maria.

" I want to tell you," she said, " all the gratitude I feel to your little Maria. I have asked her for the grace of resignation, and received it to the full. I should have been pleased to live, now I regard serenely both life and death. Let the Saviour do with me as He wills. I gladly offer my life for the good of my family."

She was assisted by Father Rosi, under whose guidance she would tread the last steps of her sorrowful Calvary ; and frequently received the Blessed Sacrament, from which she drew courage to support her acute sufferings. In her last days she asked for Extreme Unction and, like little Maria, asked that those consoling prayers might be repeated in Italian.

She was no longer able to pray, but her cruel sufferings were borne with an edifying serenity which became more marked as the end approached, giving to the onlookers the firm assurance that she had gone to receive from the Saviour the

reward of her generous sacrifice. Perhaps one of the most touching letters is that from the poor prisoner whose conversion we referred to in the previous chapter. It was written from the prison of S. on August 13th, 1929.

"Once again I thank you for the precious little book containing the life of the dear saintly little Maria.

"The gift was a precious grace from God, infinitely piteous to those in suffering, who, not content to show each day to me His infinite sufferings in my devotions, would also send me this sublime example of goodness and complete *abandon;* of suffering borne in His holy name with a courage and love verily heroic. Only to a soul transfused in Him could He concede such ardour of Divine love, in a body suffering such agonizing torture. A sublime example not only for little ones, but also for the greatest, as Cardinal Laurenti so justly says. Suffering which pierces the hardest heart which has had the grace to know her; love which inflames, elevates, transports heart and mind into an atmosphere of heavenly purity, into an *abandon* which desires and invites pain in order to experience the joy of losing one's self and one's being in God.

"How much good this book, falling into the hands of some poor strayed soul who has not had the last feelings of his heart hardened by vice and crime, would do. How much it might do if it fell into the hands of ——, to whom I should

send it if I did not fear he would throw it aside as useless waste-paper, or worse. But the moment will come for him. I am sure of it. We are mortal, and life is something that passes like a flash of lightning. But God is eternal, God is never in haste; God does not reveal His secret designs, but fulfils them when least expected by the creature.

"The moment will come also for —— to see the error of his ways. We must never despair, because that which is unknown to us is known and possible to God Who alone knows how to choose the means and the opportune moment. For us there remains the duty of propitiating Him by our fervent prayers, asking pardon of His offended Majesty and waiting in confidence for the fulfilment of His holy will. For my part I shall continue to pray for this unhappy soul, and all my prayers will be directed to little Maria, the elect little lamb of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, that she may become his protectress. I have entrusted him to her, and from her I look for this miracle, because only a miracle can save this unhappy young man from the complete ruin towards which he advances with terrifying speed.

"To myself this precious little book has done immense good, and brought me great comfort and infused a great peace in my soul. I have read and re-read always with great enthusiasm and increasing admiration. In it I see myself reflected

as in a looking-glass, and I see there all my crimes, all my wickedness, and from it draw instruction for my amendment. O precious little book! Life truly admirable of this little Maria of Jesus. She speaks straight to the heart of the one who will understand to those who live in agonizing distress, to those who have no other comfort which can heal the anguished heart and lift it into the pure atmosphere of a world more just, more beautiful than this, where they may enjoy spiritual happiness."

S.M., at Padua on January 30th, 1930, writes: "I return the relic of little Maria with a thousand thanks. During the novena the patient experienced a notable improvement, so that she partly recovered her speech and consciousness; she expressed her joy, kissing the image of the dear little girl which she had beside her. Without a suggestion from anyone she went to confession and communion during this time. 'Think, father, she was a poor lost child; the intercession of little Maria and our prayers have gained this good for her soul.'

"Once again darling little Maria merits our thanks and our gratitude."

ROOM IN WHICH MARIA DIED

## CHAPTER XXIII

### LETTERS TO HER FIRST SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, FATHER SPILIMBERGO

HER first two letters are in the form of a diary. Poor little Maria, during the first days of sorrow, after the departure of her confessor, found comfort in writing every day.

### Letter I

Padua, May 4th, 1926: "I begin at once to write something to you. You know I have need every day to give free vent to the grief of my poor soul. I commit my little thoughts to paper so as to send them to you, and then I open my heart.

"To-day is verily a sorrowful one for me. The sad day has come in which you have gone away. I went to Mass and was consoled. My dearest Jesus has taken away my support, but He Himself has promised to help and watch over me. Certainly these first days

are sad enough, because this is the first spiritual cross the Lord has sent me, and it is a heavy one. Thus in this month I have had to give a big flower to the Madonna. She is pleased with it because it is watered with abundant tears. When I shall go to the Madonna of Monte Berico I shall ask of her the grace of resignation, and my heavenly Mamma will surely not deny it to me.

"My heart and my soul have found much consolation in your consoling words: 'Jesus knows you are very little and cannot walk alone, therefore your littleness gives you the right to be carried in His arms.' Thus, close to Jesus, I abandon myself to the Divine Heart and often confide to Him. He will hear me and sweetly respond to me.

"Besides, Jesus has already given me one consolation. Because, going out yesterday evening, I had the good fortune to see you again. This summer, or perhaps sooner, I hope to come and see you, and listen once more to your good words of sweet counsel. Meanwhile I try to put them in practice; to be good and love Jesus."

"May 5: Reading the Eucharistic magazine I felt much comforted in soul. 'Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be consoled.' By whom? By our sweet Jesus! What joy we experience in the heart when we are con-

soled by Jesus. Then the weight of the cross feels lighter, and we feel more resigned. Then we say to Jesus, '*Fiat voluntas tua*,' seeking to walk in 'the little way' in which S. Thérèse has walked."

May 6th: "Every time I pass near the hospital I feel a pain at the heart; a sense of desolation assails me and I think, 'How many times I have entered there and listened to the sweet words of my father! How many times I have placed my sorrows and troubles at the feet of Jesus by means of my father and come away relieved! When shall I enter that church and find him again? Perhaps never.'"

May 7th: "Have you not noticed, my father, that the sky is always overclouded these days? So, too, my soul is covered with clouds. I have only one ray of serenity! To-day in Holy Communion I said to Jesus: 'Send a little serenity into my soul which has such great need of it.' I cannot yet get used to your absence. I cry freely, and at the same time want to be strong. I never forget you in my prayers. How could I forget when you are always in my heart and thoughts?"

May 8th: "To-day is the feast of the Madonna of Pompeii. I went to Mass and asked Jesus in Holy Communion for two special things: that He would make me good, and bless you. Thursday of the Ascension

perhaps I shall go to Verona. Oh, father, pray for me!

"I wish the Madonna may send me a confessor who will understand my heart well. You, father, how well have you read it, and how well you have directed me along the right way; and I have lost you all too soon.

"I have wanted to cry, but I have put all my sorrow at the feet of Mary."

May 9th: "You, father, have told me to throw to Jesus the flowers of little sacrifices; this I understand well, but to win Him with caresses how shall I do? You will explain it to me.

"It is not yet eight days since you left and it seems to me to be months. I want the time to fly, because every day which passes brings me nearer the moment when I shall see you, my good father. I must confess that often when I try to be more gentle, when the most favourable moment comes for putting in practice this sweet virtue of gentleness, I forget it and am ill-humoured. I repent at once and put my naughtiness at the feet of Jesus. Father, forgive me if I have written so soon, but I want so much to have news of you, and to read your consoling words. In the Holy Sacrifice, when you hold Jesus in your hands, speak to Him of this poor little lost lamb. Bless me. . . ."

## Letter II

May 18th: "I have had a letter these days from Piero which has indeed renewed a little the light which has been taken from my soul. He made a ray of sunshine penetrate the thick clouds. '*Dominus dedit Dominus abstulit.* Even this trial is a sign that Jesus loves you, because he would have this sacrifice from you, and open for you new founts of merit. He will not leave your soul an orphan.' . . . It really consoled me.

"What a joy to receive your eagerly awaited letter, and to find myself compared in it to the little lamb of Jesus; but the little lamb is mild, sweet and pure, and I instead am still the same naughty little one. I always have the same rugged temperament. With the help of Jesus, with goodwill, remaining always in the arms of the Divine Master, close to His loving Heart, I hope to improve myself.

"Your letter has tranquillized me and gladdened my heart. My soul no longer feels so forsaken; I enjoy your sweet words and strive to follow your dear counsels."

May 22nd: "My displeasure has not disappeared, although my soul is tranquillized, yet the thought of you costs me very much. Jesus has taken you from me, but He has

entrusted me with a beautiful mission—to pray! How lovely it is to ask for that which we need, to pray for graces and graces from the Divine Heart of Jesus. I am asked to pray to obtain certain special graces. And I, by a little prayer and a few little sacrifices and giving many caresses to my Jesus, win from His Heart these graces. Now I am making a novena to the Holy Ghost to enlighten me in the choice of a confessor, but you, father, will always be my spiritual director, won't you?

"I am re-reading the life of S. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus. Now that my soul suffers so much it seems to me more beautiful and helps me to be better and more resigned."

May 23rd: "Father Rosi wrote me to pray much to Jesus to draw a great grace from His Divine Heart, a grace which if granted would give great glory to God.

"Already Jesus has granted this grace: a little boy grievously ill had to undergo a difficult operation, and there were great fears for his life. All has issued quite happily, and the little boy is better. Thanks be to God!

"Father Rosi wrote: 'In exchange for your prayers I will put you in the chalice with Jesus when celebrating the Holy Sacrifice. Maria, the little victim, with Jesus the Divine Victim.'

"Oh, how lovely for us to be found alone,

Jesus and I, in the holy chalice so closely united. To say to Jesus: 'All my joys, all my bitternesses, I commit to You. I love You, I love You very much. O Jesus, make me all Yours!'"

May 24th: "Jesus sent you to me. . . . You taught me how to love Jesus and how to pray better and to accept with willing spirit whatever it pleases Him to send me, and even when He took you from me. I am indeed a little lost sheep. . . . 'I am only a little bird,' as says S. Thérèse, 'covered with a little down.' I am not yet an eagle, but I would have the eyes and heart of an eagle."

May 25th: "I entrusted my little crucifix to a friend who took it to Lourdes, to Ars, Paray-le-Monial. It was bathed in the blessed water which flows from the marvellous grotto and, rich with so many blessings, has now come back to me. With what ardour I have pressed it to my heart and said: 'O, Jesus! Finally You have come back. I can kiss You and confide in You.'

"I have also been given some medals and some Lourdes water, water which I take with devotion every day.

"If the Madonna grants me the grace of restoration to health I have promised to go to Lourdes myself, but first of all I have asked her to make me good.

"Certainly I have a great desire to see the white Madonna of the Pyrenees, to prostrate myself at her feet and tell her how much I love her, and to win from her many graces which I desire and many blessings upon my dear ones and upon you.

"I beg your blessing and ask you to present me to Jesus."

## Letter III

Trento, July 29th, 1926: "I have no words in which to tell you the consolation I experienced when I was with you. It was indeed the joy of the little lamb when she had found her pastor; a joy full of sweetness. Certainly consolations which do not come often, but with all the more reason are desired and valued.

"Now, with the help of God, I find myself very well.

"I have not had an opportunity to make a visit to the church every day, like I did at Padua, but I often recollect myself within, or better, in the Heart of Jesus, and remain for some moments in an act of love.

"Yesterday morning when I got up I saw the summits of the mountains covered with snow; a stupendous spectacle.

"With how many beautiful things does

Jesus surround us! What love we ought to give Him in exchange. Mamma goes back home probably on Thursday. A new sacrifice which Jesus asks of me, and which I offer Him willingly."

## Letters IV and V

Trento, August 7th, 23rd, 1926: "My aunt proposes to go with me again this year to the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Caravaggio a Piné. At the feet of the beloved Madonna I shall be mindful of you.

"The Heart of Jesus wills me to have all the consolations possible, and I do not know how to return them. I am so many times so wanting in patience and gentleness. I must change and better myself. A little lamb, and a little lamb of Jesus, ought to be so gentle! . . . "

"I have been to the Sanctuary of Piné and have had the happiness to receive Holy Communion there. I prayed much also for you; for you, and for all who are dear to me.

"That Jesus would do with me what He wills, but that He makes me good, good, good!

"I have inscribed the names of all dear to me in the Congregation of Perpetual Masses,

and I have taken the liberty to inscribe yours also. I send you the certificate of inscription.

"Mamma has returned home. Now I am alone; but not really alone: I have my aunts and cousins, and above all I have the company of Jesus.

"I cannot, then, say I am alone, but I feel it very much not having mamma. This sacrifice, as you suggested, I have offered from the first moment to Jesus. Now I am contented and not depressed.

"Your letters have given me great pleasure because there is no one who speaks to my soul and consoles me like you.

"I shall try and be good as you and Jesus desire me to be."

## Letter VI

Trento, September, 1926: "Friday, then, you were at Padua. You may be sure had I been able I would have flown there so as to be near and listen to your good counsels.

"Some evenings I must admit I feel a longing for my beloved Padua, for my family, and for you, my father! Then your letters and the lovely holy pictures have given a little light, which perhaps was lacking, to my soul. While all are asleep, and dear little Tonino, always a little angel, in his white

bed near me, I turn my thoughts to Jesus for myself and all dear to me, and it seems very sweet to pray in that silence and solitude. Sometimes I prolong my talks with Jesus. Almost every evening I read some part of the Gospels and go to sleep with the thought of Jesus in my heart."

## Letter VII

Padua, October 30th, 1926: "My soul is still full of the consolation I experienced during your brief stay at Padua, and the infinite joy you gave me by celebrating the Holy Sacrifice in my little room, and bringing Jesus to help and sustain me in the trial which He has sent me.

"This joy and this consolation remains with me and keeps my courage up, and not only that, but they help to make me better even physically.

"Father Rosi also has come to see me several times. He speaks to the heart and I love to hear him. He repeats all that you have said, which has done me so much good.

"On my little bed he tells me I can be an Apostle, offering my sufferings for the salvation of souls continually to God.

"Truly now, it is not so much suffering as weariness, but I offer this also to Jesus. I

will keep nothing for self. I am writing in bed, but perhaps to-morrow I shall get up. For my sake you have shortened your holiday. I pray Jesus to reward you for this sacrifice.

"I thank you for your good wishes, which I reciprocate with all my heart. Bless me as always, and do not forget your little lamb."

## Letter VIII

Padua, November 22nd, 1926: "You say I have quite forgotten you! Ah, no! be sure that joy and consolation still remains in my heart.

"I see again in imagination that little altar and Jesus in the holy Host, all white, Jesus come down from Heaven for me! Almost a month has passed since that sweet morning, and I want you, father, in order to recall that day, to say a Mass of Thanksgiving on the same day, the 25th; and that Jesus makes me good and continues His protection, and not only that, but that He gives me the grace of a perfect *abandon* to His will.

"I have chosen Father Rosi for my confessor, because to go first to one and then another does not satisfy me.

"I trust I have done well; his words always give me much consolation.

"I pray you to keep me always as your little lamb, and to remember me in your prayers and daily benediction. I shall return it by praying for you with much gratitude."

## Letter IX

Padua, December 21st, 1926: "I thank you so much for your sweet letter and lovely holy pictures.

"What candour in these little souls who came to receive Jesus from the hands of Jesus. How redolent of Paradise?

"Which of these two do I resemble? Certainly the one with flowers in her hands.

"I delight in offering to Jesus bouquets of spiritual flowers; to prepare for Him a cradle adorned with shining stars; little sacrifices, acts of virtue and love. I would have Him lie, not on the straw, but on a soft couchion of perfumed petals formed by the sighs and heart-beats of love. Not in a miserable stall, but on a little regal throne, in a heart pure, burning with love; and I want that heart to be . . . mine.

"On Christmas night, if the weather is fine and I feel well, we shall go to midnight Mass at the college.

"Before the Divine Baby and His heavenly Mother be sure I shall not forget you.

"And I pray you in this holy night to put me close to little Jesus.

"Do you remember last year? You were at Padua, and during Christmas Day you came to see me. This year Jesus wills you to be far away. This, too, will be a perfumed flower which will go to adorn the cradle of our dear Jesus.

"I often look at the lovely holy pictures you have given me. Going from one to another, each one so beautiful and symbolic, many beautiful thoughts come to me from them all. They are reminders, too, of the occasions on which you gave them to me, and this, too, is very consoling to me. I would ask you if during these days you can say Mass for us, so that Jesus, hidden in our hearts, may find a certain correspondence to His love. I never forget your Apostolate, upon which I invoke the choicest blessings of Jesus."

## Letter X

Padua, January 6th, 1927: "I feel yet in my soul the intimate joy of the hours passed in your company. Your loving words remain engraved upon my heart; your good counsels make me full of gratitude, and I propose, with the help of God, to draw much profit from them.

" The little lamb is always trying to become more sweet and gentle, and to have a complete *abandon* to the Divine will the better to please Jesus. I thank you with all my heart for your visit. It was indeed a royal gift from Jesus. Along with the magazine of ' Comfort ' I have received also the Eucharistic calendar. I had finished the other one, and I was regretting not having a good Eucharistic thought to meditate upon each day. I do not know how to thank your great kindness and solicitude for me. I would also beg you to say a Mass for us, that the Lord may bless us always.

" Do you remember January 6th last year, when you came and brought Jesus to me ? This morning I have received Him in church and prayed for you. We ought to pray also much for Piero, that he may worthily respond to the grace of God, the hopes of his superiors, and that he may become, as he says, holy, wise and strong.

" Your little lamb begs your blessing."

## Letter XI

Ash Wednesday : " I began on this day to write to you. I say began, as I have had to recommence several times because I have been obliged to take to bed again.

"Now I am feeling well, and to my great joy am able to spend a little time writing to you.

"From January 23rd, as you know, I have been suffering, but from January 23rd Jesus also surrounded me with graces. Imagine! In a month Jesus has come to me ten times; He has vouchsafed to come from His house and enter my little room, bringing me such strength and resignation. He has helped me to sustain well every trial, however painful they have appeared to me.

"I am indeed the elect little lamb of Jesus! But the little lamb ready to be sacrificed. I have abandoned myself tranquilly in the arms of Jesus, and I say to Him: 'Do with me what you like, I am content.' Father Rosi calls me 'Little Maria of Jesus,' and that pleases me very much. But I am also the little bunch of grapes which offers itself to the hands of Jesus for Him to press; I would, too, be a little grain of wheat which wishes to be ground into fine flour so as to become the bread of Jesus. Is not all this beautiful? Is it not supremely consoling?

"One morning after Holy Communion, Father Rosi said to me: 'Jesus is here very close to you; if He said to you: "I will grant whatever you wish, whether you wish to be restored to health or to continue to suffer, I

shall be equally content with the one or the other." What would your answer be ?'

"I said I should ask for suffering. He was pleased. What is suffering down here compared with the eternal joys which we shall experience in Paradise ?"

March 3rd: "'Pain is short, joy eternal.' I found this also written in your paper 'Comfort.' And I am fully convinced of the truth of it, and accept willingly whatever the Lord sends me.

"Now I am going to give you a great confidence. For I feel I must open my heart to you who are verily my father."

February 11th. "A date indeed memorable in my life; a shining moment, a great joy. On February 11th, the day of the Apparition of the Blessed Virgin at Lourdes, in Holy Communion I consecrated myself entirely to Mary by the vow of virginity and chastity. You can imagine, father, the comfort it gave to my soul. Now I am the little daughter of Mary as I am the little lamb of Jesus. Mary covers me beneath her mantle. Oh! surely I need fear no tempest thus protected!

"But now I have the greater need of being sustained by your prayers, that I may correspond worthily to the many graces which I continually receive from Jesus and Mary.

Only Father Rosi and mamma know this, but I am pleased for you to know it too."

March 6th: "To-day I have been in bed forty-four days. The doctor allowed me to get up for a little while. I am pleased, and thank my Jesus so very much. However, had He required me to still stay in bed I should have accepted it willingly. I only want to do the will of Jesus. This morning I have received Jesus again. Ought I not to give Him all my gratitude and my love?

"You will thank Him for me, father, and tell Him that His little lamb would rest always on His heart?"

March 9th: "I add a last word. For two days I have got up and feel very well. Thanks again to Jesus.

"During all this time I have had the assistance of my Aunt T. Jesus has willed to mitigate the cross by procuring for me her help and welcome company during the times when my mamma is absent.

"Bless me always."

## Letter XII

Padua, March 27th, 1927: "Thank you for your very sweet letter, which I have read and read again with much emotion. Until

now I had cherished the hope of coming to see you at Easter; the eager desire of the little lamb to find herself for a little while beside her pastor and open her heart to him. But now I understand that it is impossible; the journey would be too exhausting. I am better, but my strength is very limited. Sometimes, even often, Jesus is pleased to press His little bunch of grapes, and I willingly accept the suffering so that by it some soul may return to Him.

"Every time that He wills me to suffer I say to Him in all confidence: 'Yes, Jesus, do what you like, but send a soul to Father Rosi.' This morning the father told me that he sees the effects of my prayers, because fresh souls are continually coming to him. As you can well understand, I am so pleased, and give thanks to my good Jesus. He often comes to visit me and refresh me, and this time He has not come only for me, because mamma has not been well and has received Him at home several times; and my joy has naturally been doubled.

"As always I remember you in my prayers, and hope that you do not forget me in yours.

"I pray you to bless with fatherly affection your little lamb."

## Letter XIII

Padua, May 13th, 1927: "I have wanted so much to answer your sweet letter, but have not had the strength to do it. However, you have never been forgotten in my thoughts, nor do I forget you, especially during the frequent visits Jesus makes to me.

"How much light and strength I receive from these heavenly visits. 'My soul,' says Father Rosi, 'ought to be a white lily nourished by the most pure blood of Jesus,' and from Jesus I would become all that.

"Now I am making the month of May, with mamma, before the little white image of the *Immacolata*, adorned with white flowers. I like this lovely month and pray much to my dear heavenly Mamma that she will make me like herself and always protect me. I am reading a most beautiful book, 'The Intimate Life of Mary,' by Baiunvel. I read a little each day together with mamma. My soul is always serene, and could not be otherwise with the many consolations which my good Jesus gives me.

"I am sustained by powerful wings, for it is really not myself, but Jesus and Mary who carry me along.

"My health, for which I give thanks to

Heaven, is quite good. For some days I have felt a little stronger and do not get so tired when I do a little work or read a little. With the good weather I hope to pull up a little, if it is the will of Jesus and Mary. I leave it all completely to them.

"And you, father, how are you? You know how much I long to see you.

"Five months have gone already since your visit, and it seems to me like five years. If I could pull myself together and get a little strength to support the journey mamma would bring me to see you.

"But this, too, I leave to Jesus.

"A few days ago I received a letter from Parma in which eight children, quite unknown to me, asked my prayers that they might worthily receive Jesus, Who for the first time would enter their hearts. They promised to say a little prayer also for me. How beautiful is this exchange of prayer; this union of souls in Jesus! And with you, too, I am always united in the heart of Jesus; is it not so?

"I pray you to hold me present in the Holy Sacrifice, and to send me your blessing."

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THREE LETTERS

THESE three letters each have a special interest of their own. The first was written to the brother of Maria by Cardinal Laurenti, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, on receiving a copy of the first edition of her life. His Eminence says : " I thank you for the welcome gift of these sweet pages of the life of your dear little sister Maria. I read them during a brief interval of repose at the Charterhouse of Trisulti, and they have greatly edified and moved me. Dying at the age of fifteen, this dear little girl had learned much concerning the true life of the soul. A delicate flower cut down at the beginning of her mortal career, what delicacy, what candour, and what spiritual perfume she manifests. But this little lily-like soul, so sweet and pure, was likewise strong and generous.

" In the Eucharistic light she beheld the beauty of the Son of the Virgin and consecrated herself to Him, to ascend her Calvary with Him. She had

her crown as Bride of the Crucified, a crown fashioned of thorns and lilies. How profoundly we are moved as we behold the smiling immolation of this innocent little girl on the cross of her slow and cruel martyrdom. Although so young, she had penetrated the mystery of the cross. She rejoiced in being nailed to the cross that she might die mystically with Jesus, that so she might give Him the highest manifestation of her love, and transmit to other souls by her generous Apostolate of pain the fruits of the Redemption.

"These short memoirs are a treasure for youth; they speak to the heart through the mute preaching of this little missionary. And not to youth only. What an example for those of mature and even advanced age! They come as a salutary monition, which both humbles and encourages us to see the little ones so far surpass us in virtue.

"Their agile flight to God quickens our slow and wearied steps, and makes us more eager to redeem the time.

"This brief but holy life of this sweet, lovable little girl recalls to mind the little child Jesus set in the midst of his disciples with the words: 'Except you become as little children you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'

"To you who are so fortunate as to be the brother of dear little Maria I express these thoughts which have come spontaneously as I read the beautiful little book you have given me. I tell you in confi-

dence that when I had finished reading it I knelt and thanked God for the gifts He had bestowed on this elect child, and recommended to her innocent youth my wearied old age."

The second is from Father Spilimbergo, the first spiritual director of little Maria, and was written to her mother: "I have read with real pleasure this short life of your dear daughter 'little Maria, the little lamb of Jesus.' These pages, full of frankness and simplicity, faithfully reproduce the sweet figure of that soul who loved God so much, and whom, for a short while, I had the happiness of directing, as well as admiring her rapid progress in virtue. Little Maria merits to be known—she who lived so well in the spirit of S. Thérèse of Lisieux and found therein the secret of a truly enviable perfection.

"As one reads these brief recollections, spontaneously from the heart there arises a fervent praise to God Who has been pleased to manifest His manifold grace by inviting even the youngest and least experienced souls to tread the path of sanctity fashioned by sacrifice and renunciation.

"A way not followed by many, because few are ready to respond generously to the Divine call. One of these few was little Maria, victim of the love of God.

"How inspiring it is to see this little soul patiently occupied in a long and difficult conflict with her

strong imperious character in order to imprint sweetness and goodness upon it.

"But she is still more admirable when, having overcome the first resistance of nature, she abandons herself completely to Jesus and, leaving all, ascends the hill of Calvary with a smiling countenance, there to offer the supreme sacrifice of her life.

"These brief memoirs show clearly enough that she drew from the Heart of Jesus, whom she had loved from infancy, that heroism in giving all to Him which was the unique end of her life here below. Her whole life is summed up in the words of S. Paul: '*Mihi vivere Christus est.*' You are indeed fortunate and blessed in having been entrusted with the training of this chosen soul, whom you may happily consider as your most powerful advocate in Heaven.

"There, close to Jesus, little Maria will intercede for all mothers who understand how great a thing it is to educate their children in a Christian way, and her example will increase the number of little souls who follow 'the sure way' of S. Thérèse of Lisieux."

The third is from Father G. Rosi, S.J., the last spiritual director of little Maria. He says: "This short biography, so frank and simple, reveals as in a mirror the sweet figure of Maria Filippetto; she appears there in all her beauty of soul as I knew her.

"Hers was a little Eucharistic soul hidden from the world, who lived an intense life of the love of God, and in that love was consumed a victim all unknown.

"There was nothing extraordinary about her to excite curiosity or to create easy admiration. Outwardly her life developed along the lines common to a family of her class. She was a vivacious, lively child, fond of school, where she was remarkable for her intelligence and application.

"Suddenly stricken by a malady which blighted all the dreams of her parents, for five years she endured the most painful and excruciating suffering which slowly but inevitably led to her death.

"But, within, a most marvellous work was going on in her soul. Not once a shadow of rebellion in her sufferings; rather she beheld them all with the eyes of a living faith, in which she found a potent lever with which to rise to the height of perfection, and she embraced them as the most evident proof of God's love for her.

"Serene and tranquil resignation gradually became transformed into that joy in suffering by which she carried the cross with and for Jesus, to be consumed in and immolated for Him. And that is not all: the love of God kindled in her heart the most ardent zeal, and suggested a more delicate industry in order to imbue her sufferings with the sacred flame of the Apostolate. 'To suffer anything whatever,' as she exclaimed, from the immo-

bility of her bed, 'so that Jesus may give me some sinners.' The salvation of souls became the devouring passion of this angelic girl. The precious treasures of grace which Jesus, from the Eucharist, poured forth in her heart are concealed beneath an air of childlike ingenuity; her sincere, spontaneous humility drove far away any shadow of pride or vanity.

"She was little before Jesus, and rejoiced in being a little child. She was rapt in admiration of 'the little way' of S. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus, and desired to be hidden and unknown in this new path of perfection by means of love and suffering.

"In youthful souls who always have within them a rich fount of generosity, the reading of these intimate moving pages will produce great good. Thus will little Maria continue upon earth her fruitful Apostolate."

These letters from the two priests who in turn were the spiritual directors of little Maria, and to whom she revealed all the intimacies of her spiritual life, bear eloquent testimony to her heroic courage, her sanctity, and her apostolic zeal for souls.

*Anyone receiving favours through the intercession of Maria Filippetto are asked to notify—*

Rev. Father G. Rosi, S.J.,
Rector of the Pensionate Universitario Antonianum,
Padova, Italy.